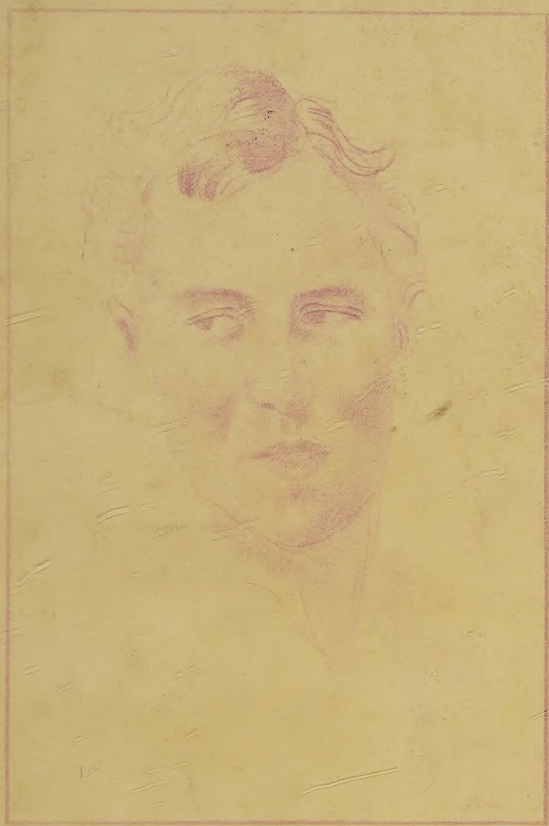


# RONALD FIRBANK



A Memoir by  
IFAN KYRLE FLETCHER

With Personal Reminiscences by  
LORD BERNERS      AUGUSTUS JOHN  
V. B. HOLLAND      OSBERT SITWELL

£18

The fame of Ronald Firbank as a writer has been posthumous. His books, with the exception of "Prancing Nigger" were little read in his lifetime outside a small circle of admirers. He himself was known in London primarily as an eccentric. Now that his literary works have come into their own, an increasing body of readers are anxious to know more of this almost legendary figure, whose extraordinary exploits are so often recounted. In this book an effort has been made to collect and co-ordinate the facts of his life and to preserve something concrete from the mass of anecdote about him which seemed otherwise in danger of being lost with the very few individuals who knew him at all well. Many distinguished persons have contributed to this composite biography which it is hoped may give a coherent picture of one of the strangest figures of the twentieth century.

The book is illustrated with portraits by Augustus John, Wyndham Lewis, Charles Shannon, and Alvaro Guevara.

8/6 net





RONALD FIRBANK

THE WORKS OF RONALD FIRBANK, with an Introduction by Arthur Waley and a Biographical Memoir by Osbert Sitwell. 5 vols : edition limited to 235 copies. London, Duckworth, and New York, Brentano's, 1929.

*The Rainbow Edition of the Works of Ronald Firbank. 8 vols. Duckworth, 1929 1930*

VAINGLORY

INCLINATIONS

CAPRICE

VALMOUTH

THE PRINCESS ZOUBAROFF


PRANCING NIGGER (SORROW IN SUNLIGHT)

THE FLOWER BENEATH THE FOOT

CONCERNING THE ECCENTRICITIES OF CARDINAL PIRELLI

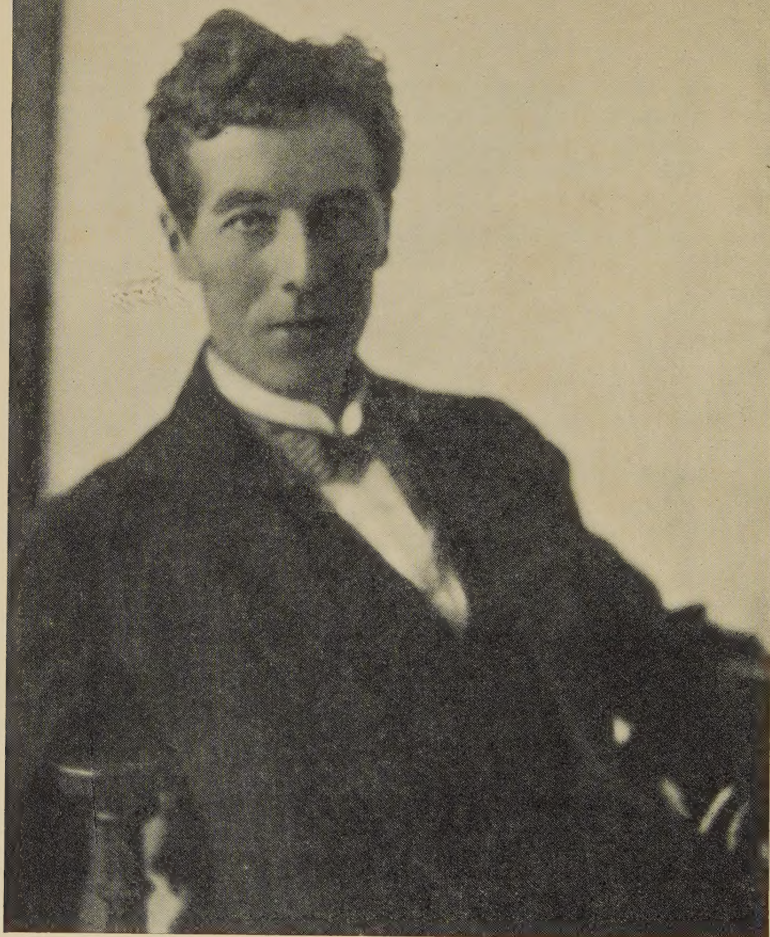
*Demy 8vo. Cloth 3/6 net each.*





Digitized by the Internet Archive  
in 2023 with funding from  
Kahle/Austin Foundation

*G. A. T. Firbank 1917.*



RONALD FIRBANK

*Bertram Park*

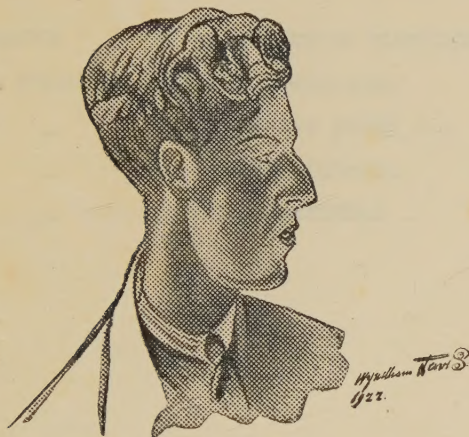
*[Frontispiece]*



# RONALD FIRBANK

A MEMOIR BY IFAN KYRLE FLETCHER

WITH PERSONAL REMINISCENCES BY  
LORD BERNERS, V. B. HOLLAND,  
AUGUSTUS JOHN R.A., AND OSBERT SITWELL



WITH PORTRAITS BY  
ALVARO GUEVARA, AUGUSTUS JOHN, R.A.,  
WYNDHAM LEWIS, AND CHARLES SHANNON, R.A.

DUCKWORTH  
3 HENRIETTA STREET, W.C.  
1930

*All rights reserved*

*The Reminiscences by Osbert Sitwell are reprinted with some alterations  
from the limited edition of THE WORKS OF RONALD FIRBANK (1928)*

Made and Printed in Great Britain  
By The Camelot Press Ltd  
London and Southampton

## CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
THE MEMOIR BY IFAN KYRLE FLETCHER	9
RONALD FIRBANK BY V. B. HOLLAND .	101
„ „ „ AUGUSTUS JOHN, R.A. .	113
„ „ „ OSBERT SITWELL .	117
„ „ „ LORD BERNERS . .	145



## ILLUSTRATIONS

RONALD FIRBANK . . . .	<i>Frontispiece</i>
RONALD FIRBANK . . . . from a drawing by WYNDHAM LEWIS	<i>Title-page</i>
JOSEPH FIRBANK . . . .	<i>facing page 14</i>
SIR THOMAS FIRBANK, M.P., D.L., J.P. . .	18
RONALD FIRBANK . . . . from a pastel by CHARLES SHANNON, R.A.	36
RONALD FIRBANK . . . . from a drawing by AUGUSTUS JOHN, R.A.	60
RONALD FIRBANK . . . . from a drawing by AUGUSTUS JOHN, R.A.	96
RONALD FIRBANK . . . . from a drawing by AUGUSTUS JOHN, R.A.	114
RONALD FIRBANK . . . . from a painting in oils by ALVARO GUEVARA	124





THE MEMOIR

BY IFAN KYRLE FLETCHER



## AUTHOR'S NOTE

SHORT of making an exhaustive, and exhausting, catalogue of names, there is no way in which I can mention all who have helped to write my section of this book. To them all I offer my grateful thanks. But no terrors of invidiousness shall prevent me from recording my special gratitude for special favours to Lord Berners, Mr. A. S. B. Graham, Mr. W. D. Graham, and Mr. A. C. Landsberg.

I. W. K. F.





## THE MEMOIR

### CHAPTER I

THE Chinese have a saying that, in judging a man, it is essential to look back at least three generations in order to discover the state of education of the family. In the case of Ronald Firbank, the enquirer, even if he be as astute as Tu Fu, would be puzzled to find the roots of his talent in the life of his great-grandfather. A glance back to the third generation reveals a Firbank who could neither read nor write. He worked all his days as a coal-miner at Bishop Auckland, in the county of Durham, and his sons seemed destined to follow the same life. One of these, Joseph Firbank, commenced work underground at the age of seven. By means of evening classes he augmented his scanty schooling, with the heroic intention of leaving the mine when opportunity arose. His chance came at the end of fourteen years, and it took the form of a glorious offer to work as a labourer on the railway construction scheme between Bishop Auckland and Weardale. There was something in the new railway work which called up the genius in Joseph Firbank. The steps of his development were as rapid as they were remarkable. The next year he obtained a sub-contract on the Woodhead Tunnel. In 1854 he went to Newport to undertake work for the Monmouthshire Railway and Canal Company. There

he was quick to buy land which was shortly to be required by the Great Western Railway Company. In 1866, as one of the largest contractors in the country, he was triumphing over innumerable difficulties of construction at Carlisle.

In spite of his success, he remained pleasantly unaffected. Those who knew him throughout his career have vouched that their memory of him was the same, in essentials, in poverty and in affluence. They remembered a short, rotund man, his head set low on a wide neck, his small eyes twinkling at the top of his spreading nose ; a man who worked with a fury of energy and spoke with disconcerting directness. At the beginning of his career, he was offered, by a generous friend, a loan free of interest to start a contract. He replied, in his rich dialect :

“ I values at nowt what I gets for nowt.”

Years later, when everyone with money to invest endeavoured to secure his advice free of charge, he adhered firmly to his principle. A solicitor, who was anxious to discover in what companies Firbank was investing his money, planned to travel to London by the same train and to worm out the information during the journey. As though by accident he got into the same compartment. After the usual greetings he opened a conversation which could be led to the subject of the companies. All seemed to be going well, when Firbank leaned across and said :

“ And what takes you to London ? ”

The solicitor was quick with his reply.

“ A little business, for a client.”



JOSEPH FIRBANK



Firbank looked at him out of his small eyes and then said steadily :

“ Mr. Leslie, you’re a damned liar ! ”

He sat back and said not another word.

By the time of his death in 1886 he had reached an eminence which enabled him to command respect from all the business men of the country. They were able to say over his grave that “ he was an excellent specimen of the Englishmen who rise up not so much by any transcendent talents, as by intelligence and energy and above all by honesty and inspiring confidence in those for whom he had to work.”

Admirable memorial as this may be, it is more revealing of its age than of its subject. While it may have satisfied the Victorian commercial conscience, it did far less than justice to the robust individuality of Firbank. There must have been many who longed to bring sincerity to this stilted epitaph by recalling his lively methods of maintaining an enthusiasm for work in his gangs. Polite these methods might not have been, but at least they were tokens of imagination and verbal range. Or someone should have remembered his affection for the men working under him, and how he provided immense consignments of beef and beer for his labourers. The affection was amply returned. There was not a railway worker on the line who had not a kindly word to say of “ old fairther Firbank.” This nickname, with its sense of friendly intimacy, is a more lasting memorial than the business men’s fine speeches.



The small details of his life, apparently unimportant but full of meaning when related to one another, all point to the conclusion that the business men were wrong in their estimate of him. Energy he had, but educated intelligence he lacked. There can be no other explanation of his refusal to accept tempting contracts out of the country. He explained that it was because foreigners did not pay in English gold. Even Ireland was a foreign country in his narrow view. He had no hobbies himself, and disapproved of them in others. In his later years he entrusted much of the management to his son, Thomas, who had other views about relaxation. But the old man paid periodical visits of inspection. On one of these he found a spruce hunter in the stables with the cart-horses. He looked at it sourly, and then said to his son :

“ Eh, lad ! That woarnt pull a load o’ muck ! ”

Similarly, he disliked holidays. When persuaded to go away, he usually returned long before the date fixed. Like all men of limited interests, he hated idleness, from which arose his habit of retiring to bed at eight in the evening and rising again at five.

In these habits there are signs of his lack of education and his cramped environment. Yet his business deals prove that he possessed natural genius. His calculations for tenders were worked out by mental arithmetic. Himself he told the story of how he laid the foundations of his fortune by trebling an already profitable estimate. By such incidents did he prove his inherent aptitude for big business. It is

not absurd to claim that there was something of the artist in Joseph Firbank. Although he made only "the most beautiful railways" (as his grandson called them), he had such overwhelming zeal, such fixity of purpose, and such skilled technique, that his work passed beyond the usual confines of craftsmanship. His life was wholly absorbed by his work. Even religion failed to secure entrance. His neighbours in Newport whispered the shocking rumour that he was a free-thinker ! A free-thinker in 1870 ! His genius must have been paramount to preserve his business in the face of such a suspicion. It is terrifying to conjecture what would have happened if they had known of his playfulness with the corpses in St. Pancras Churchyard. It was in 1864, when he was building the Midland line into London. The work necessitated the removal of part of the burying-ground of St. Pancras Church. Reverence was shown to the disturbed remains by removing them to consecrated ground elsewhere. In the midst of the work a message was received that the body of a French Roman Catholic dignitary was to be taken back to his native land. Unfortunately, the digging operations had disturbed the grave. When it was opened, it was found to contain three sets of bones ! From this dilemma the ingenuity of Firbank found an escape. The man was a foreigner ; therefore he must have been dark. They would choose the darkest skull and find rights and lefts to fit it. Solemnly the workmen carried out the instruction. Some days later an eminent French Roman Catholic dignitary was buried with great

pomp in his home place. If Ronald ever heard this story he would have appreciated it.

Joseph Firbank died at St. Julian's House, Newport, on June 29th, 1886. His immense fortune was divided between his seven children, not, however, without the usual litigation. His business was inherited by his eldest son, Joseph Thomas, later to become Sir Thomas Firbank. This title and his honours as Member of Parliament and Deputy Lieutenant gave an air of great dignity to the new head of the Firbank family. His resemblance to old Joseph in feature and build increased the respect which was shown to him as his father's son. It seemed likely that he would become very popular, especially as he contrasted favourably with Joseph in the matter of hobbies and social recreations. But the contrast, to bring him real fame, would need to have extended to many things other than hobbies. When the contrast was made it was found in every case that the rare personality of the father was unassailable. The step from autocracy to pomposity is small.

Joseph Firbank used to boast that "the Firbanks have a knack of marrying the right women." This was true of himself. His first wife, by her intelligence and grace, did much to smooth his social rough corners. It was no less true of Sir Thomas. When he married Miss Jane Garret, his life became coloured by the sensitiveness to beauty which guided her temperament. By birth she was Irish, being the daughter of the Reverend James Perkins Garret, of Kilgarron, County Carlow. She was a



SIR THOMAS FIRBANK, M.P., D.L., J.P.





beautiful woman, sensitive and attached to lovely things. Due to her influence, Sir Thomas gathered around him collections of *objets d'art*. His French furniture and prints, and English furniture and porcelain, were famous among connoisseurs, who visited him at Petworth and Tunbridge Wells in order to admire his treasures.

Arthur Annesley Ronald Firbank, Sir Thomas and Lady Firbank's second son, was born in London in 1886, the year of his grandfather's death. That he never saw his grandfather does not prevent the playful law of heredity from drawing them much nearer together than obvious family ties drew father and son. Towards his mother he maintained a steadfast and affectionate regard. From her he first learned to be fleet in the pursuit of beauty. But, if any of the secret of his strange personality is to be found in his ancestry, the immovable force of his isolated independence must be sought in his grandfather as much as his unwavering devotion to beauty was derived from his mother. But it is to misunderstand Ronald Firbank to suggest that any scientific law can reveal his mystery. The blunt forthrightness of Joseph underwent a profound change to become the nervous retirement of his grandson, just as Lady Firbank's love of beautiful things was twisted into a strange shape when it became her son's deceptively casual æstheticism.

## CHAPTER II

THE boyhood of Ronald Firbank was lived under the contrasting influences which play upon a family passing upwards through the social strata. Railway contracts, politics, Moreau prints, and ormolu furniture typify the influences. Big business and *The Yellow Book* strove for his affection. Very early in his life two factors decided the issue. He suffered from ill-health and, perhaps as a result, he was a spoilt boy. Frequently he was taken to warm climates to repel the advances of the throat affection which, even then, was troubling him. In 1901, at the age of fourteen, he was sent to school for the first time. The arrival at Uppingham of this tall weed of a youth, entirely incapable of holding his own in the rough-and-tumble of school life, must have been the signal for outbursts of ragging. From his point of view, the atmosphere of an English Public School, antipathetic to his trend of thought and definitely opposed to his taste for the poets and painters of the nineties, must have seemed Philistine and reactionary. He had no place in a system of education based upon classwork, games, and communal life. Details of his life at Uppingham are not available, but a small tragedy is concealed behind the bare entry in the school register :

“ Arthur Annesley Ronald Firbank : Entered September, 1900. Left April, 1901.”

He continued his education under a private tutor at Buxton. While there he met R. St. C. Talboys,

who directed him in his reading and encouraged him to write. Such gentle guidance found a response in his nature. The experience of normal education at Uppingham had the effect of deepening his inherent reserve, without in any way lessening his self-consciousness. Two terms at Uppingham made him react from all forms of mediocrity ; two years might have had a very different effect. For so nervous a boy it would not have been easy to withstand the inroads of a powerful system, although his behaviour in later years must convince us that his resilient nature was capable of astonishing resistance.

About this time he was reading the works of Lord Herbert of Cherbury, and he determined to visit Newport, where, at St. Julian's House, Lord Herbert had written *De Veritate*. It was this Tudor mansion, then decayed into a farmhouse, which had inspired Joseph Firbank to call his new house and estate by the same name. Ronald arrived at Newport and hired a hansom cab. "Drive me to St. Julian's House." The cab rattled through the drab streets of Maindee, (built from the remains of a London suburb demolished during a railway contract,) and pulled up in front of a Victorian neo-classical mansion.

"What is this?"

"St. Julian's, sir. Fairther Firbank's old 'ouse."

"But I want the old St. Julian's. Lord Herbert's house."

In vain Ronald protested. This was St. Julian's. And, still protesting, he was driven back into the town. Then began an excited questioning of

policemen. No one could help, until he was directed to a student of local history. Eventually, after a morning which had completely exhausted his small store of nervous energy, leaving him in a state of hysterical giggling, he achieved his desire to see the real St. Julian's.

The next step in his education had the effect of widening his horizon, while leaving his liberty unfettered. In the summer of 1904 he was sent to a château at Tours to learn French. At this time the suggestion was first made that he should enter the Diplomatic Service, and a period of study in France was considered a suitable preliminary. Whether it was, we shall never know; the Diplomatic Service was never embarrassed by the strangeness of his talents. In other directions his stay at Tours was valuable training. He learned French, and, more important, he studied French literature. He read Maeterlinck, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Flaubert, Gautier, and Henri de Regnier. His education was not only literary but liberal. He acquired the graceful habit of wearing ties from Doucet's and from Charvet's. He felt for the first time the attraction of the Roman Catholic religion. And he found in the scenery of the Touraine the focus of his growing literary powers. The aura of grey and gold and soft rose, in which the château had its being, he hung around his story *Odette d'Antrevernes*.

“In the long summer evenings, when the shadows crept slowly over the lawn, and the distant towers of the cathedral turned purple in the setting

sun, little Odette d'Antrevernes would steal out from the old grey château to listen to the birds murmuring 'good night' to one another amongst the trees.

"Far away, at the end of the long avenue of fragrant limes, wound the Loire, all amongst the flowery meadows and emerald vineyards, like a wonderful looking-glass reflecting all the sky; and across the river, like an ogre's castle in a fairy-tale, frowned the château of Luynes, with its round grey turrets and its long, thin windows, so narrow, that scarcely could a princess in distress put forth her little white hand to wave to the true knight that should rescue her from her terrible fate."

In 1905 he published a slim volume containing this story and another sketch called *A Study in Temperament*. Some of the copies were bound in pink wrappers and some in blue. The pallor of these colours offended his eye, now quick in æsthetic sensibility. He expressed his detestation in a letter to his publishers which foreshadowed his later ironical work. From the point of view of the public, he need not have been concerned. His book was ignored. One cannot blame the critics that they did not recognise in it the first work of a potential genius. One cannot blame his present admirers if they find it tiresomely precious, lacking the humour which farced his novels. It was written at a time when literature was more important to him than life. He was powerfully under the influence of Maeterlinck, and mystic simplicities drew him to



writing which to-day sounds hollow and pretentious. But what Firbank the writer then ignored, Firbank the wit stored up in his mind. In after years, he often talked about the château and its inhabitants. His conversation never attempted to recapture the solemn mystery, but always dwelt on some hilariously funny episode of his stay. Alas! in a way which was habitual to him, before he had said many words he shook with uncontrollable laughter – and his listeners were forced to accept the joke on trust.

Other works showing the influence of his visit to France are a dream play, entitled *The Mauve Tower*, and an episode called *True Love*,<sup>1</sup> possibly written after his first visit to Paris and attempting to recapture some of the glamour of the city. The play shows, too clearly, his indebtedness to Maeterlinck and his love of touching in his scenes, as though with heavy dabs of pigment.

It was now decided that he should proceed to Cambridge, and, as the next step in his preparatory studies, he was sent to Madrid in March, 1905. His stay lasted two months, during which time he studied Spanish, made a few friendships amongst literary people, and appeared much in fashionable society. He lived in rooms in the Calle Mayor, where he entertained his friends with exquisite grace. The room was heavy with the aroma of incense and the fumes of candles burning in tall sconces. The tea-things gleamed sharply against the dull patina of old wood. Ronald sat near the fire in a chair hung with red

<sup>1</sup> These works are unpublished, and I am indebted to Messrs Dulau, of Old Bond Street, for permission to examine the typescripts.

silk. As he talked witty French in a high voice the flames flickered rosily on his cheek-bones and forehead. Antonio de Hoyos y Vinent, remembering such an occasion, wrote that his host was "alto, rubio, delgado y un poco presumtuoso, aunqui con chic, un tanto afectadillo."

Returning to England, he entered Scoones's in October of the same year. During his stay with Mr. Scoones he lived at 49, Nevern Square, the house of Mr. de V. Payen-Payne, one of the tutors. His fellow-boarders were the Hon. John Mitford and Mr. Lascelles, son of Colonel Lascelles of Petworth. Mr. Payen-Payne has described the advent of Firbank.

"Mr. Scoones suggested to Firbank that he should live in my house. He was entirely spoiled by his mother, who was the cause of the weakness of his character. When he came to live with us she sent a footman and a housemaid to prepare his room with a new bed, complete with eiderdown, and a special armchair. Mitford and Lascelles dominated this weakling, and used to borrow his eiderdown and anything else they desired. Firbank, although weak, had a sweet nature and perfect manners."

Whatever preparations he may have made for the Diplomatic Service, he remembered his stay with Mr. Payen-Payne for another reason. In a letter written years afterwards he said :

"Of course I have not forgotten, and very well I remember that it was at your house that I first heard of Dowson and read first Verlaine."



Throughout these years prior to Cambridge his personality was rapidly forming. His tastes for *fin de siècle* literature both French and English, Impressionist painting, and Russian music, were already acquired. Modifications and extensions of his outlook were to take place, but at the end of 1905 his was a developed personality. The changes which were to come were only those which accompany increased knowledge and experience. Already he despised people whose feeling for beauty was not as keen as his own. He hated "the mob," as he called the vulgarians of all classes. He was nervously self-conscious, and had already learned to conceal it behind a barrier of reserve, when his gestures grew long and sinuous and his voice slithered without control over his sentences. His friends sometimes thought that he was playing to the gallery, but, as one of them wrote :

"He was really too fastidious ever to be cheap – unless it is cheap to be for ever striving *not* to be so !"

In that sentence lies a hint of Firbank's self-torturing complexity. A. C. Landsberg wrote :

"No one could be more full of contradictions than he was, being one of those people who are naturally artificial and sincerely paradoxical."

It is this twisting of qualities which to-day makes him appear so remote, like a figure from a Restoration comedy. And it was this twisting of qualities which, in his lifetime, made him so vitally baroque.

His life seemed all grotesque ornamentation. His love of beauty was skilfully disguised. But it was always apparent in his hatred of pretentiousness. He suspected his own expressions of admiration as strongly as he questioned the sincerity of all rodomontade. Growing out of this was his refusal to talk seriously about art and life, even to kindred spirits. He feared that serious talk would become sober tosh. Therein lay the cause of the mocking isolation of his later life. Like the Sleeping Beauty, he lived in a shadowy haven of retreat, secure from the world behind an impenetrable barrier of briars.

## CHAPTER III

It was in October, 1906, that Ronald Firbank went up to Trinity Hall, Cambridge. The choice of college was curious. In the words of a Cambridge correspondent,

“Trinity Hall in those days was chiefly a college of rowing, hunting, and racing men, who seldom passed examinations successfully.”

Although not a sporting man, Firbank did something to maintain the reputation of the college. He sat for no examination – not even “Little-Go” – and he completed only five of the nine terms. His time was devoted to more personal studies than academic training embraced. He attended rehearsals of the Footlights’ Club, being in some position of unofficial authority; he made long and delighted visits to the Fitzwilliam Museum; frequently he

disappeared from Cambridge, to return full of impressions of concerts and exhibitions in London. Although he was out of his element at Trinity Hall, he probably made more real friendships than at any other time in his life. As long as the sporting men did not rag him, which they did only once, when he appeared in ridiculous running togs, he was happy in the congenial company of Vyvyan Holland, A. C. Landsberg, and Rupert Brooke. Amongst the older generation he won the esteem of the late Charles Sayle, who loved to entertain undergraduates interested in literature and the arts, and S. C. Cockerell, the director of the Fitzwilliam Museum, who remembers him as "a sensitive and rather shy young man with fine discernments in art and literature and rather exotic tastes."

When A. C. Landsberg went up to Cambridge in 1907, he found Firbank already at Trinity Hall. Recalling their friendship, he wrote :

"Neither Firbank nor myself fitted into the college particularly well. The great advantage to both of us was that one was not bothered too much about passing exams. As he was a little older than myself, he seemed to me without age – for he gave one the impression both of being old and of being under-developed in some ways. He and I were the only members of the college who took the least trouble about making our rooms beautiful, or who took any interest in art generally. Through him I was introduced to *The Yellow Book*, Savoy and Wilde tastes, and to modern French poets and novelists.

As I was at the time fresh from Harrow and English coaches, and full of the usual schoolboy prejudices and mistrust of originality, I was both thrilled and a little suspicious (this is not quite the right word, but it will have to do). In any case, in some ways I confess that I sympathised no less with the general college atmosphere than with him, especially at first. I both admired him and found him a little ridiculous – and even sometimes pathetic! You see, ours was such a very sporting college that I was myself conscious of not being in my right element, and he was even less so, and looked – I thought at that time – terribly feminine, sophisticated, cosmopolitan, and ‘elegant.’”

His rooms were on the chapel side of the entrance-court of the college. Those who knew him best, remember him most vividly in the strange beauty which he created out of the drabness of college rooms. His room was arranged with old red silks, masses of flowers, and a number of dainty tables, covered with books and statuettes, and, in a place of honour, a photograph of his mother in Court dress. The statuettes were a fascination to him; mostly they were reproductions of Gothic religious figures, but sometimes they were Pompeian and Tanagra work, paganly attractive. Once he brought back from London an Egyptian bronze statuette. His whim was to have an opal set in it. When his friends remonstrated, and urged that this would mar the dull green surface, he replied,

“It must be done, as a propitiatory offering!”

In his room he would sit in curtained and shaded twilight, behind his head the yellow glimmer of candles set in carved and gilded candelabra. As he talked in his high-pitched voice, the silhouette of his face, large and fleshy, with low brow, aquiline nose, and full lips, would pass across the light. His hands, clasping his ankles or circling his head in frequent gestures, glinted with the sombre colours of his rings. Usually he wore a green jade Chinese ring, but occasionally he preferred the colour of some blue Egyptian rings, made of earthenware. In appearance, he always reminded A. C. Landsberg of the portraits of society women by Boldini, "as he was always writhing about and admiring his hands." His clothes – although made by the best tailors – always looked a little foreign. The same Continental atmosphere surrounded the parties which he gave, parties at which E. P. Goldschmidt and Mario Colonna were frequent visitors. The dinner in honour of Robert Ross is described in detail elsewhere by Mr. Vyvyan Holland, but this was only the most famous of many elegant parties. Firbank entertained very exquisitely, choosing the menu, the decorations, the company, and the conversation with delicate care. Professor E. J. Dent remembers a dinner-party at which he and Rupert Brooke were the guests, when the room was decorated with masses of white flowers. Often on these occasions, Firbank talked little, but, if he had recently been to London, he would be full of news of pictures by Shannon and Ricketts, concerts of the music of Granados and Debussy,



new French books and plays. He seldom directed the conversation, but added to its piquancy by a well-timed anecdote. Frequently his stories were unfinished. Either his mind would fly off at a tangent, leaving his listeners to bridge the gap, or he would lose his climax in torrents of hoarse, helpless laughter.

Much of his time was spent with Monsignor A. S. Barnes, the Roman Catholic chaplain to the University. The leaning towards mysticism, which had first become apparent in France and which revealed itself later in his reverential awe for Egyptian deities, now became prominent. It is not difficult to understand how a nature such as his, delighting always in the tangibility of visual beauty, finding refuge from the reality of existence in the ordered elegance of his own life, was attracted by the tradition, dignity, and colour of the Roman Catholic service. Harder to understand is his intellectual reaction to the Church. While proclaiming that he hated the mob, he was being drawn to a religion which demanded subjection of his personality. His spiritual privacy, the result of a deliberate withdrawal from the world to hold a satirical watching brief, was in danger of invasion by doctrines of self-sacrifice and communal worship. The explanation afforded by the æsthetic satisfaction of the Church ritual is not upheld by the testimony of a friend who met him in Paris in 1910 and found that the service made no appeal to him, but that he was still profoundly moved by the mystic element of religion. The thought arises that, under an exterior of nervous elegance, Firbank concealed

spaces of his mind where reason had no sway, where the vast ideas of infinity and eternity and immortality moved helplessly except for the guidance of faith. The explanation of one friend that it pleased him to coquette intellectually with priests gives place to the subtler belief that his aloofness, like his nervousness, was deeply rooted in his nature. He turned from people not intellectually but instinctively. Unlike others, who attempt to conceal the real motives by logical explanations, Firbank never gave reasons. But it is as certain as anything can be that, at times, he was conscious of the loss inflicted upon him by his unnatural nature. Not that he seriously missed social amenities, but that he was deprived, in himself, of the poise and self-possession which were, in his eyes, the most precious of virtues.

In spite of the fact that his Cambridge friends believed his mind to be too comprehensive to be held within one creed, he was converted to the Roman Catholic faith in 1908.

"I remember," wrote Professor Dent, "being at Sayle's house one evening and talking about Firbank. Sayle pulled out his watch (it was about 9 or 9.30 p.m.) and remarked:

"'Yes, that young man is at this moment being received into the Catholic Church.'"

Firbank was always reticent about his beliefs and his religious activities. At the time that he left Cambridge he spoke to a few friends about his

connection with the Church. In later years it was a subject which he avoided, and, except for the occasion on which he said to Lord Berners, "The Church of Rome wouldn't have me and so I mock at her," he confided in no one.

When Professor Dent took Rupert Brooke to see Firbank he had no inkling of the curious friendship which was to spring up. At first glance it seems that Brooke's avid delight in the world contrasted so markedly with Firbank's nervous retirement that no intimacy could have existed. But the attachment occurred during Brooke's ninetyish phase, of which Firbank approved. The so-called unpleasant poems in Brooke's 1911 volume awakened a response in a mind which was then considering the necessity of belief in wickedness. About the time that Firbank was accepted into the Roman Church he was immersed in a theory that positive evil has a place in man's spiritual life. "If for no other purpose, to add colour to life," he said. Rupert Brooke, it will be remembered, felt that "the rosy mists of poets' experiences" had been rather overdone. His biographer claims that "ugliness had a quite unaffected attraction for him; he thought it just as interesting as anything else; he didn't like it - he loathed it - but he liked thinking about it." Two men with such ideas must have found much in common, and the bond was strengthened by their senses of humour. Again, in this respect, they were alike, yet different. J. T. Sheppard has written of Brooke's ironic habit of laughing at his friends and treating their most cherished enthusiasms as amusing,



if harmless, foibles. This gift of irony was possessed to a higher degree by Firbank. In the cold light of his wit all enthusiasms appeared valueless. Even the pursuit of beauty without pretension, almost by stealth, was not proof against his wit. Brooke's society was, as Sheppard wrote, "in the good sense, comfortable." Of Firbank it might be written that his society was, in the pure sense, comminatory.

From contemporary evidence, their friendship seems to have been real, and Firbank's regard for Brooke's poetry sincere and unaffected. The years following Cambridge brought a change of mind. One evening in 1914, "Eddie" Marsh, Brooke's biographer, was at Drury Lane for a performance of the Russian Ballet.

"I went out between the acts," he wrote, "and, noticed a strange figure pirouetting about in the corridor and making little faces to itself. I got the impression of a waxwork that had escaped from Madame Tussaud's and met with a good but injudicious Samaritan who had taken it to a public house. Everyone stared, and I was idly watching the scene without any notion that I'd be involved in it, when the figure suddenly darted up to me, took my right hand out of my trouser pocket and shook it warmly, saying in a rather mincing voice :

" 'I'm going to Kamschatka. Do you think I'm wise ?' "

"While I was wondering what to say, he went on still more urgently :

“ ‘Do say I’m wise.’

“ I made the only answer which occurred to me :

“ ‘I don’t see what else you could do.’

“ He then changed the subject and said :

“ ‘You knew Rupert Brooke, didn’t you?’

“ ‘Yes,’ I said.

“ ‘Did you admire him very much?’

“ ‘Yes.’

“ ‘You’re wrong—I’m better than he.’

“ This was more than I could bear, and I executed the manœuvre known as turning on one’s heel. Later in the evening someone told me the man was Ronald Firbank. And so if in my old age I am asked, ‘And did you once see Firbank plain?’ that is what I shall have to tell.”

Early in 1909, when his period at Cambridge was coming to an end, Firbank thought of applying for a post at the Vatican. He no longer mentioned the possibility of a position in the Diplomatic Service. In preparation for this Papal preferment, he talked of going into retreat, adding, as the spirit of absurdity asserted itself, “As much for my looks as for the welfare of my soul.”

This was the time when he became jealously proud of his good looks. Charles Shannon had just drawn a pastel of him which revealed the sensitiveness of his features and the charming slimness of his profile. His dismay at discovering that he was becoming plump was genuine – and faintly amusing. He used to diet himself, take long walks in all weathers, and even tried running. It

was only the preservation of his looks which persuaded him to appear in running shorts and so make himself the butt of the sporting men. He had a horror of growing old. To the methods of preserving his youth may be attributed a characteristic of his later life – his inability to eat – just as his fear of age may account for the narcissistic habit of having his portrait painted. Observers of his habits have noticed that he ate little while he drank much and have presumed from his weakly health that his ailment prevented mastication. There is no evidence to support this theory, and it is more likely that his habits of dieting engendered a dislike of food by suggestion. In the same way, his vanity has been blamed for the number of portraits which he commissioned. Shannon, Augustus John, Wyndham Lewis, and Guevara drew him at various times. But his vanity was always at the mercy of his malice, and pride in his own features would not have lived long against his devastating sense of absurdity. The swift passage of the years made personal his theory that only art was enduring. If he was to bar the way of time, it must be done through art. His features, which he hated should become old and sunken and wrinkled, were to be made into lovely patterns by great artists. All his fine discernments were used to choose the artists who should preserve him against mortality.

The years at Cambridge, so full of experiments in which music, painting, acting, and literature all took their place, left their most definite mark upon his writing. The literary tradition of the University



RONALD FIRBANK  
from a pastel by CHARLES SHANNON, R.A.

[p. 36



helped him to outgrow his desire to exemplify in himself a unity of the arts. The equality of the art forms in abstraction might be taught, but in practice every influence in Cambridge served to orientate him towards verbal expression. A. C. Landsberg remembers that

“his sensitiveness was such that it was obvious when one saw him what book he had last been reading – especially, of course, if it was something very strong like *Hamlet* or *Volpone*, when he would behave like Hamlet or Volpone, and speak to one almost as if he were Hamlet or Volpone !”

In his private reading at this time, Maeterlinck and Huysman were his favourite authors. Their influence was heavy upon him, like a luxurious scent. He admired their deliberate withdrawal from forms of realism, their reaction from the Trade Union tendencies of late Victorian literature, their celebration of the solemn mystery of beauty. This was his Impressionist period, and it was many years before he passed out of its rich, overheated atmosphere into the disciplined rigours of Post-Impressionism. But already his experiments were leading him in that direction. He was working at a sort of mosaic, in which the pattern was picked out in pretty touches and amusing details lifted from life. He watched people and events with detached and malicious observance. Always he was listening for scraps of conversation which would give the right emphasis or colour to his design. Returning from a



trip to London, he would be as excited about a *faux-pas* he had seen at Rumpelmayer's or an *incongruité* he had overheard in the train as if he were bearing a new book by "Max" or an Egyptian amulet of rare potency.

In spite of the deference which was shown him as the author of a published work, he aroused the hostility of those who were affrighted by the fantastic. A Cambridge contemporary said that, "being so strongly marked a personality, there were people who couldn't bear the sight of him." But justification, if ever it were needed, was to be found in his whimsicality, his love of beauty, and what Roger Quilter called "his impish sense of the ridiculous."

#### CHAPTER IV

FIRBANK went down from Cambridge in June, 1909. His life there had done little to break the barrier of his reserve or to widen his sympathies. The congeniality of his few friends served but to emphasise the antagonism of "the mob." His deliberate isolation, a token of his nervousness and refinement, was a proof of his claim that he lived like a hermit. Poverty he hated, but he hated vulgarity still more. To live in the world was constantly to be touched by vulgarity. Only in a world governed by his sense of perfect manners and swayed by his obscure rules of conduct could he remain undisturbed by errors of taste. In spite of this, he adored luxury and the world, although he was continually wounded by

it through his over-self-consciousness and sensitiveness. The sense of freedom which came to him on leaving Cambridge did not compensate for the irritation and annoyance bred by the discovery that in the world the percentage of giganity was even higher than in a university microcosm. Although some had hated him at Cambridge, his eccentricities had largely been accepted as the deviations from the normal to be expected of an æsthete. They were smilingly condoned. The same eccentricities transplanted to the bleak air of London appeared absurd and unforgivable. They were frowningly condemned. From his pampered upbringing he had learned to expect acquiescence in every whim. In its place he now encountered the sharp mockery of people who did not trouble to understand him. Even his friends found him pathetic and rather absurd, while acquaintances jeered openly at his silly behaviour and his ridiculous belief in his own literary powers. Reacting against these oppositions, he allowed his desire to live in solitude to develop into a craving for isolation.

The death of his father in 1910 revealed consequences of far-reaching importance to the conduct of his future life. It is idle to suppose that Ronald can have felt deeply the death of one who had little sympathy with the ideas and desires which actuated his life. He welcomed the increased sense of freedom and the hope of a larger income. It was an unpleasant shock when the reading of the will revealed the fact that Sir Thomas had been losing heavily on his contracts. The Firbank fortune,



enviously large in the days of old Joseph, had dwindled to no more than a comfortable income. Sir Thomas had concealed this unpleasant news from his family. Only after his death did they find it coldly revealed in his will. The unpleasantness of this sudden deprivation was increased by the secrecy with which it had been concealed. Lady Firbank, formerly the most charming of women, became terrified of finance, and suspected every business arrangement of being another means of taking advantage of her financial ignorance. The effect upon Firbank was to increase the barrier between himself and the world. Poverty was hateful, even his very comparative poverty. But more hateful was the vulgarity of acknowledging the importance of money. He knew that many only tolerated him because he entertained lavishly. If the vulgarity of mundane conversations with his friends appalled him, how much more odious was the thought that the dilettanti who drank at his expense should know of his mortification. So, everyone who met him was impressed with the luxurious distinction of his surroundings. He wore exquisite clothes, massed rare flowers in his rooms, ate little but delicately, drank quantities of champagne, and mocked at those who had the low taste to drink ale and stout. Behind such masks did he save himself the necessity of explanation. And everyone talked with awe of his immense wealth.

The expected sense of freedom was somewhat curtailed by this monetary consideration. In any case, for some years he had possessed all the freedom

he required. It was only the sense of it which was lacking and which he welcomed eagerly. For a little time he lived with his mother in Curzon Street. Then, in the winter of 1911, he paid the first of many visits to Egypt. The attraction of this ancient and mysterious civilisation was to grow in power throughout his life. But this did not prevent him from writing :

“ I dare say, dear, you can't judge of Egypt by *Aida*.”

The fascination exercised on him by Egyptian antiquities had been checked by the influence of Catholicism. That influence was waning ; in 1911 he had ceased to show any interest in Christian mysticism. As his mind swung, momentarily unguided by a powerful faith, he felt again the attraction of Egypt. During his visit he found that its antiquities had for him an esoteric significance, the secret of which, he believed, would one day be revealed to him through a supernatural agency. His mind was entangled by the mystery of the Sphinx. But there may have been some truth in the belief that his mind was too subtle to take one creed as being the only possible form of absolute Truth. On his return to England, he met a disciple of Aleister Crowley, who was then carrying out magical work in Paris and London, and was writing *The Equinox* and *The Scented Garden of Abdullah*. Probably Firbank read these works ; certainly he passed through a short phase of profound interest in magical ritual.

Visits to Constantinople and Vienna were events in the wanderings of this period. His travels were so extensive and were made so unobtrusively that it would be impossible, even if it were necessary, to keep a record of his journeys. Their value is to emphasise his unromantic outlook. To Englishmen, leaving the shores of their small island, comes some of the glamour of adventure and discovery – a natural emotion to a nation of explorers. Firbank knew nothing of this imaginative excitement. He did not penetrate into the fastnesses of Tibet; he did not climb in the Himalayas. His trips were made, calmly and almost casually, to well-known tourist resorts. “Ducking always the touch of must and shall,” he contrived to make his leisurely excursions fit the imperative needs of his health. But never did he show himself conscious of those needs, nor of the attractions of his journeys. He would be found living at Rome, Florence, Madrid, or Bordighera in a state which was neither naturalised nor alien, but a strange, intermediate grade of his own devising. Fringing the English colony, with whose members he maintained no more than a bowing acquaintance, he yet, by his unconscious eccentricities, seemed to flaunt his foreign origin before the natives. When one of the importunate English visitors said to him, as “Lady Rocktower” said in *The Princess Zoubaroff*:

“Although you live within a stone’s throw, one sees simply *nothing* of you,”

perhaps he replied in the same words as the Princess:

“Yes. *How is it*, I wonder?”

Only the small group of his chosen friends – A. C. Landsberg, Evan Morgan, and Albert Rutherford – were allowed to see more than the surface of his life. He met them frequently in London and Paris. He talked to them much about the book he was going to write. Since *Odette* he had published nothing, although throughout his Cambridge days he had been gathering material and fashioning it into his clear patterns. He seemed unable to bring himself to the final effort of production. Not even his intimates took seriously his intention to write, not because they doubted his ability, but because he was gay and heedless, always willing to drop the occupation of the moment to loiter on the boulevards. There he would sit far into the night, forming, in the high tones of his voice and the sinuous gestures of his arms, an impression of the novel in the manner of Gautier that he would one day write. Gautier had become his literary model, although Wilde and Beardsley still maintained an influence. What Ezra Pound has called “the muzziness” of the nineties was ceasing to attract; the riot of half-decayed fruit was giving place to the glitter of gems. He talked so much of writing, but he never seemed to write. He was so taken up with attractive theories – the affinity between prose narrative and Impressionist painting and the ineluctable brightness of *le mot juste* – that his friends, in the midst of discussion, agreement, and disagreement, would

smile dubiously when he mentioned his own work. Their doubts would increase when, giggling with nervous excitement, he would suggest a round of visits to some of the "restful" places he knew in Montmartre. The early morning would find him still drinking champagne and talking, his voice switchbacking over tabooed subjects. For one so weak, he was amazingly unafraid. Dangers seemed never to exist to him. So, lacking the discretion which is the better part of valour, he often proved a sore trial to his companions. Once, when the forbidding character of the haunt occasioned suspicions of the youths with whom he was drinking, he had to be removed by force, protesting hysterically against the maliciousness of the friend who was robbing him of his amusement. After such events he would punish his misguided friends by withdrawing from them the grace of his company. When next they met, the subject would not be mentioned, as though Firbank, in his forgiveness, had consented to forget their indiscretion.

In London he was often to be found at Le Tour Eiffel, the headquarters of the Vorticist group. This restaurant lingers on the outskirts of Tottenham Court Road as though to give a masochistic stimulation of ugliness to its æsthetic clientèle. Firbank, with his powerful sense of contrasts and his detestation of squalor, must have felt some such emotion as he sauntered past the cheap furnishers or paused to look at the French magazines fluttering outside the enigmatic general shops. By a conscious mental attitude he was able to position vice within



his field. At Cambridge he was arguing that wickedness added colour to life. But vulgarity always repelled him. Like most men of sensitive nature and unusual instincts, with strong attractions and repulsions, he came to derive a perverse pleasure from being hurt. The thrill, at once exciting and nauseating, which came over him in Percy Street was akin to the nervous delight which he took from the spectacle of a gang of greasy bookmakers mocking him in the Café Royal. Outside Le Tour Eiffel he could contrast the mean street, lined with frowsy windows, with the discreet gloom of the restaurant, each table a rosy reinforcement of pleasure and elegance. At the Café Royal, when on a race night he sat, pink cheek by heavy jowl, with the exulting bookmakers and heard their coarse witticisms as he twisted his glass with carmined fingers, his pleasure was intense. No smile of his full lips or glint of his cold eyes revealed that it was his joke and not theirs. In his own time he finished his drink, set down his glass with a gesture which emphasised his limp elegance, casually drew out a wad of banknotes and paid his bill. With malicious enjoyment he noticed how the small eyes of his neighbours narrowed with avarice and how ingratiating smiles crept upon their faces. When one of them passed the time of day with him his triumph was complete. Appeased was his hatred of vulgarity, revenged was his outraged shyness!

At Le Tour Eiffel he shared a table with Augustus John, Evan Morgan, and Thomas Earp. In this casual fraternity he was the most irregular. There

was no means of ensuring his presence. Generally he would come alone, but sometimes he would bring a chance acquaintance, one of a group of people who formed a shadowy background to the events of this period. From this distance it seems that Firbank's progress through the life of Paris and London is chequered by consecutive lights and shadows. At one moment he is quite clear, sitting in a restaurant, drinking champagne and eating a persimmon, extolling the beauty of a Conder fan to Albert Rutherford; at the next he has passed into an obscurity. Although he passed through a phase, in which, to use his own words, he "experimented with life," the shadowed portions of his progress were to no large extent hectic superimpositions. They were a definite part of the pattern of his life. To know Firbank is to see elements of grace, wisdom, wit, reserve, nervousness, masochism, and perversion mixed in strange but attractive proportions. Never did he pose; never was he deliberately eccentric. To accept his characteristics as data is to be in a position to judge the normality of his actions and reactions. Those to whom conduct should be maintained on the basis of a seventeenth-century homily, those to whom the word "unnatural" brings elemental fear and the anger of indignation, those to whom eccentricity spells charlatanism, will never appreciate Ronald Firbank. While others thought of vice and virtue, he was concerned about vulgarity and elegance. There are so few people in the world who will not read a book because its cover is ugly, and who build up friendship on the nicest subtleties

of unspoken intimacies. And in the end, morality and immorality are both just a little tedious.

In his friendships he was greatly influenced by personal appearance. More than most people he believed in the indicative qualities of form and manner. With an ugly or commonplace person he refused to speak. Many were the occasions on which he embarrassed his friends by his refusal to be introduced to a new arrival. Lord Berners noticed that "it was difficult to get him to accept any invitation – especially if there was a probability of there being other people present." Once, when he was taken to meet an American staying in London, he paused in the doorway, looked once, muttered, "He is much too ugly," and walked away. The object of this curt treatment could console himself with the thought that Firbank was drunk. Undoubtedly he was, but when sober he would have *thought* the same, though lacking the courage to say it. Albert Rutherston he admired because of the trim youthfulness which lingered in his face and figure. In Evan Morgan's features he found an amazing resemblance to those of the mummy of Rameses in the British Museum. In this case his delight in good looks was reinforced by the mysterious influence pervading everything Egyptian. This mummy exercised an influence strange and superstitious. When Firbank first met Evan Morgan he hurried him off to the British Museum to see "his original," Whenever they met, Firbank would feverishly suggest a visit to the Museum. His interest became almost an obsession.



He came to believe that Evan Morgan was a reincarnation of Rameses, and must, therefore, be possessed of cosmic secrets. If he waited long and patiently he too might be initiated.

At this period he found pleasure in collecting the literature of the nineties. He made a small but choice collection of association and presentation copies of Oscar Wilde, Beardsley, Dowson, Crackanthorpe, Mrs. Ros, Beerbohm, and their friends. Most of these copies he enshrined in costly bindings. Although he pursued this hobby carelessly, it afforded him real pleasure. An addition to his Beardsley collection was an event of importance and the new treasure would be carried triumphantly to Le Tour Eiffel, that its merits might be discussed. Many of these books came from the shop of C. W. Beaumont, the bookseller in Charing Cross Road, who remembers his customer very clearly and has written a charming description of him :

“ Ronald Firbank was a customer of mine before the war. He was tall and slender in figure ; his physique was almost feminine in its delicacy ; he had the wasp waist affected by Victorian exquisites. His hair was dark and sleek and brushed flat to the head ; his eyes were blue or bluish-grey ; his features were oval in shape, the eyebrows thin and arched, the nose long, the chin weak ; his complexion was fresh, with a delicate rosy blush on the cheek-bones. He was clean-shaven.

“ Firbank was always dressed in a dark, well-fitting lounge suit, and he wore a black bowler

almost invariably tilted far back on his head. He carried gloves and a cane. His hands were white and very well kept, the nails long and polished, and what was unusual in a man is that they were stained a deep carmine. I might mention that before my wife and I learned his name we always spoke of him as 'the man with the red nails.'

"He walked with a kind of leisurely saunter, as though time had no claims upon him. All his joints seemed to be loosely attached, like those of a marionette, and his movements in fact closely resembled those of a marionette, the controlling threads of which had been slackened. In short, he was a decidedly limp specimen of mankind.

"His tastes in literature were rather 'ninetyish,' although he was interested in eighteenth-century French literature of the more frivolous type. His stock question on entering was: 'Have you anything in my line to-day; you know, something vague, something dreamy, something restful?' He was very fond of the word 'restful'; all the books he liked he termed 'restful.' Even a study in the baroque such as Beardsley's *Venus and Tannhäuser* he would term 'restful,' although the normal male would doubtless consider such a work, on the contrary, disturbing."

## CHAPTER V

It is pathetically easy to realise how the war smashed Firbank's life. Even people whose needs were primitive found themselves forced to readjust

themselves to an atmosphere charged with exulting enmity – an atmosphere which crept into every cranny of the mind, turning out comfortable preferences and thoughtless dislikes, and setting in their place one ruthless prejudice. In the business of the day this was reflected in a thousand inhibitions, mandates, newspaper exhortations – “It is forbidden . . .” “England expects . . .” changing for the multitude of men into “*Défense de . . .*” “*Vive la France. . . .*”

Firbank never suffered this sea-change, but his needs were more than primitive. Where others could, with effort, readjust themselves, he was entirely lost. Europe at war held no haven for him. On August 4th, 1914, the gay, easy life vanished with the slickness of a conjuror’s set piece and left no fragments of frivolity to console those who had loved its rococo splendour. The symbols of Firbank’s happiness ceased to be vital and became memorials of departed pleasure. Lilies in Constantinople, scarabs in Cairo, music in Vienna, the ballet in Paris, books and pictures and theatres in London, with witty conversation wherever he went – these were the bright elements of his life, which, like a kaleidoscope, he had arranged in symmetry and which now were so rudely tumbled. The people who easily readjusted their outlook were to him “the mob”; the same sort of thoughtless, unsympathetic, credulous people who had laughed at him in Cambridge and sneered at him in London. The war was their triumph. In the life he had made for himself he had been able to avoid obligations

and to shun human encroachments. No one had the right of interference. The war gave everyone the excuse to demand to know what he was doing with his life and to force upon him the duties of the true-born Englishman. They peeped into his privacy, they tried to order his life, they tried to order everyone's lives. It was all done with the best of motives. But he hated it. And more still he hated the patriotic heartiness with which they believed that he would love it. This jingoism was responsible for his final desolation, when everything foreign began to disappear from the world of art. Foreign composers, artists, poets, dramatists, and performers disappeared, and Art, emasculated perhaps but British through and through, was allowed to do its bit by holding concerts and exhibitions in aid of war charities. Such a mixture of pious humbug and salacious humour was revolting to those who still cherished their memories of Massine and Granville Barker and the first Post-Impressionist Exhibition. To a mind such as Firbank's, whose realities were those of culture, whose ridicule was reserved for the pretentious, the sombre, and the moral, the war could be nothing but an irreparable disaster.

At the outbreak of the war he was living at Old Square, Lincoln's Inn, having just returned from a long stay at Bath with his mother. A. C. Landsberg remembers visiting him in August, 1914, when he found him worried but inclined to allow himself to be soothed by the peacefulness and dignity of his surroundings. The panelled rooms, glinting with

the patina of old wood, seemed a reassurance of stability. He spoke with enthusiasm of a new black carpet he had bought. On the wall was hanging another recent purchase, a drawing by Gordon Craig, which gave him great pleasure. Such solace was fleeting. During the first months of the war there was a general feeling of financial insecurity, which in the case of the Firkbanks, with their small fortune, produced something of a panic. Pressure was brought to bear upon Ronald to urge him to augment the family revenue by his personal efforts. He was genuinely alarmed. For a time he seems to have had a vision of himself as a clerk at fifty shillings a week, becoming dismally suburban and riding to work by tube. The pressure must have been powerful and continuous, because he actually reached the stage of deciding that if he had to do work he would prefer it to be in a publishing house to anywhere else. He asked Wilfrid Meynell to help him in the matter. Mr. Meynell remembers a visit when Firbank burst out in nervous exasperation against the war. From the time of that visit no more was heard of his intention to secure work. As the months passed people began to realise that, although there was a war, they had not gone bankrupt.

He spent the first year of the war in London, trying to hold together some of the scattered elements of his pre-war life. But the disintegrating force was too strong. In the summer of 1915 he stayed some months at Pangbourne, in Berkshire. There, probably, the idea first came to him to give



up his attempt to live as though nothing had happened. It is amusing as a gesture to fiddle while Rome is burning, but as an occupation it is impossible. He would withdraw from the world. The place he chose for his retreat was Oxford. It was not his university and as a writer and æsthete he would be entirely unknown to the older generation of academic thinkers, to whom the city of learning had been abandoned. The chances were that he could live undisturbed and yet within easy reach of London. He took rooms at 71 High Street; later he moved to No. 66 in the same street. With the exception of a few visits to London and Torquay, he remained in Oxford four years.

Coincident with this retirement from London was his change of name. Hitherto he had been known as Arthur Firbank, his family having chosen to call him by his first name. As though to symbolise his change of life, he announced that in future he was to be called Ronald Firbank. This announcement was of the same nature as the advertisements of his arrivals from abroad which he caused to appear in *The Times* and the *Morning Post*. In their purpose they were half serious, half a parody of the pretentious people who regularly announce their movements. That this change of name was a deliberate gesture is shown by a letter of reproof which he sent to an old friend, who, knowing nothing of his literary ambitions, persisted in addressing letters to "Arthur Firbank, Esq." He wrote that he thought Arthur a horrid name. It had always

pained him that his family insisted upon using it. The author of his books was to be Ronald Firbank.

To assert his detestation of the war he was frequently very rude to men in uniform. It gave him a meagre pleasure to make even so ineffective a gesture of defiance. One day in 1915, when he was lunching at the Café Royal with Grant Richards, his publisher, they were joined by C. R. W. Nevin-son, in khaki. Firbank and Nevin-son had not met before. At Grant Richards's invitation, Nevin-son drew up a chair to join them. For a few moments the conversation flowed easily between the publisher and the artist, until they realised that Firbank had withdrawn into a silence which chilled the atmosphere with its malicious purpose. From this no pleasantry could arouse him. It was months later that he discovered that Nevin-son's opinions about the war coincided with his own. A little later he met the Hon. John Mitford, a fellow-student at Scoones's, while travelling from Oxford to London. Conversation turned to the war, and its tenor can be gauged from John Mitford's tactful remark that "I remember the meeting in the train during the war, but my only recollection of that is that, as far as I can remember, he did not then seem to be contemplating joining the Army."

In another section of this book Osbert Sitwell refers to Firbank as "in the best, and least boring, sense a war writer." Revolted by the war, he forced himself away from it, and, in this reactionary movement, he was forced away from himself. Intense



subjectivity had grown until it was torturous self-centredness. In such an atmosphere of introversion, with all energy poured inwards in an attempt to establish personal balance, he had little chance of writing his book. At that time he had been confined in a small world which was pro- or anti-Firbank. Unable to find his place in the scheme of things, he had thought the action to be centring around himself – and he thought it mostly hostile. His hysteria, apart from its sexual diagnosis, probably had one of its causes in his inability to see himself in the contemporary setting. At the time of going into retreat at Oxford, he achieved, as far as he ever achieved it, the business of development and detachment. The achievement was effected by the simple, magical process of introducing himself to Ronald Firbank. Now he saw himself as before he had seen the world – sharp and unblurred by the softest bloom of sentiment. He became able to laugh at himself; not publicly and raucously, as do those who seek an empty cheerfulness, but privately and bitterly. Later he learned to laugh in the discreet publicity of his work. It was his work which was the greatest result of the final stage of development and detachment. His work, flowering so easily after so long and painful a period of gestation, came from the same primal force which broadened his interests; which gave him a curious but effective comprehension of men and events; which made his mind, at least in part, aware of the claims of objectivity.

His first novel, *Vainglory*, was published in 1915.

In its black cover, and decorated with a favourite pastel by Felicien Rops, it made a shy and beautiful entry into a world quite unprepared to receive it. Even was it difficult to find a publisher to open some quite small and discreet door. Martin Secker claims that

“My only distinction, and it is a negative one, is that I declined to publish both his first and second novels. He paid me several visits, I remember. I was amused by his first book, when I read it in typescript, but I saw no reason at all why it should sell, and, not being gifted with second sight, I had no idea that one day he would become a cult and that monographs would be devoted to him and his work. I recommended him to take his book to Mr. Grant Richards, so that I feel I am in a very small degree responsible for his career.”

Having made its entrance, the book remained in a state of virgin neglect. It was read by friends who received free copies from the author, and it was supposed to be read by critics who received free copies from the publisher. The friends felt it incumbent upon them to be polite, but the reviewers felt no such constraint. Until a few years before his death, when he received evidences of appreciation from readers in America, he never encountered sufficient intelligent criticism to shake from him the feeling that he was deliberately or foolishly misunderstood. The urge of creation must have been strong in him to force so nervous and sensitive a man to subject himself repeatedly

to neglect or disdain. It is difficult to know which hurt him most – the calculated coldness of the academic critics who gave him two lines at the end of their weekly budget of the latest fiction, or the well-meaning idiocy of the provincial reviewers, one of whom said that *Inclinations* was “pleasant, vivacious, and stimulating.” One appreciates the bleak wit of Firbank’s retort :

“Stimulating to what ? ”

His isolation and neglect were not relieved by the circumstance that he deliberately discouraged his friends from talking to him about his work. At Oxford he was almost without companions of any sort, and necessity forced him to dispense with the friendly exchange of opinions so valuable to most authors. This bred a habit of reserve with regard to his work, which was in direct contrast to his eagerness to talk of theories and methods in pre-war days. He confided in no one, and even his nearest friends did not know what experiments he was carrying out. At a time when he was accused of being obscure and well-nigh incomprehensible, he made no attempt to defend himself or to explain his method of writing.

From this distance it is amazing that anyone should have been perturbed by *Vainglory*. It is so charming, so full of early ardour, with the simple sophistication of dainty, gay figurines of porcelain. Almost it seems cruel to rifle its charms in search of hints about its author. But to study *Vainglory* is illuminating. A first reading reveals wit and satire and crystal dialogue. It is a close acquaintance

which reveals the rhythm, by means of which all the elements are surely linked into a slight pattern. This rhythm ordained that Mrs. Henedge's party, with battalions of guests deployed in each room, should be followed by the slim austerity of the scene in Mrs. Shamefoot's flower-shop, and that the party should be gravely remembered in Lady Anne's dinner conference "for women alone." It was the rhythm which determined the precise juxtaposition of Mrs. Henedge and Lady Castleyard, the Bishop and Monsignor Parr, Professor Inglepin and Claude Harvester. Unless it is possible to believe that an author is able to create in words what he cannot create in any other medium ; unless the dictum that "Le style est l'homme" may be rejected entirely, *Vainglory* must be recognised as a significant cenotaph. It commemorates the death of Arthur Firbank, a charming dilettante, and it proclaims the birth of Ronald Firbank, an artist in the rhythm of thoughts and verbal forms ; an artist, moreover, who, if he found it more difficult to force a pattern from the overwhelming material of life, at least set an example of grace and elegance. After the publication of *Vainglory* he worked assiduously to issue *Inclinations*, *Caprice*, and *Valmouth* before 1918 – one black-covered volume each year. For each group of characters he created a vivid and suitable setting. Each had its individuality while remaining a member of one family. Of them all, perhaps *Caprice* has made the most direct appeal to his admirers. It is not that the coruscations of wit are brighter and more numerous, or that the

passage of the plot is more intricate and more richly decorative, but that the reactions of Miss Siquier to the sophistication of London – so foreign to her simple nature – provides a theme which can suavely carry all its author's gentle malice. Especially amusing are the pages on which the Dean's daughter desiring the comfort of "some nice tea-shop, some cool creamery," wanders, all unaware, into the Café Royal.

"She advanced slowly through a veil of opal mist, feeling her way from side to side with her parasol. It was like penetrating deeper and deeper into a bath."

And who can resist the solemn absurdity of her end? She dies while executing a few athletic figures to shake off sleep, on the stage of the Source Theatre. It is presumed that she was killed in a mouse-trap, but she died alone, and all that was heard was a cry :

"a cry that was heard outside the theatre walls, blending half-harmoniously with the London streets."

Writing did not absorb all Firbank's time and energy. Deprived by the war of many personal contacts, he found a substitute in his books. At Cambridge he had been a perfunctory reader, except for his devotion to a few authors. In Paris and London people were more fascinating than their shadowy images in words. But at Oxford he found



his books a permanent delight and consolation. He flitted from author to author, from language to language, always within the narrow limits of his taste. The poetry and prose of the nineties always attracted, but he made delighted excursions into the comedies of the Restoration and the gay novels of eighteenth-century France. He read as a jackdaw steals – not for immediate gain, but to form a hoard of *bons mots*, from which one day he would select the brightest and most attractive to create his pastiche. He never allowed books to obscure his view of life. Even when his only intellectual contacts were made through books, they were substitutes. No one who saw him in the British Museum could fail to realise this. A friend wrote :

“ I have seen him in the Reading Room with rows of tomes around him, keeping up an elaborate and entirely effective mockery of study. He read one book because it was the most trivial ever written on its subject, while he pushed away the standard work with a gesture of contempt. He handled an Italian volume so that he might derive the pleasure of touch from its leather binding. Another lay open in front of him an hour or more, that he might appreciate fully the pleasant proportions of its page. This book was discarded for the solemn reason that it looked dull, while that, a Greek Testament, with a jewel set in the cover, was amusing because it reminded him of the Cyclops. Such easy contempt of sober knowledge ! And in that atmosphere ! The effect was shattering.”





RONALD FIRBANK  
from a drawing by AUGUSTUS JOHN, R.A.

[p. 60



His delight in beauty of form was always revealed in his passion for beautiful books. In his rooms at Oxford he often derived pleasure from the typography and bindings of his books. Because he was so conscious of their external beauty, he found them difficult to fit into his schemes of decoration. Although they were lovely, they intruded. He kept them in closed cupboards, so that the colour of their bindings and the gold of their titles should not ruin the harmonies of his room. He quarrelled with his first publisher about the colour of the wrapper in which his story was bound. Again, during correspondence about a later book, he wrote :

“ The ‘ crocodile paper ’ would be very effective with a dull silver label edged with blue – turquoise – and palm or emerald green top. The silver should be quite dead, almost oxydised and subservient to the gold – and in any case the blue border would relieve a too sharp contrast.”

In spite of the care with which he designed the formats of his books, he was bored by the job of correcting proofs. His disconcerting habits of spelling, in which he allowed himself to be guided by the sight and sound of a word rather than by the *Oxford Dictionary*, brought him into conflict with compositors. From their wrath he escaped by soliciting the help of friends and even casual acquaintances. But until his work was in the hands of the publisher it was jealously guarded. Not even his friends should know what he was writing. In

an expansive moment he offered to read a portion of his last book to Lord Berners. At the appointed time he arrived with the script. Nervously he curled himself into a chair and ruffled his hair with a long hand. At length he took up the first page and his mouth opened to read the words. But he jumped to his feet, muttering, "No! no! I can't read it. It isn't finished," and hurried out.

Perhaps the loneliness of his life at Oxford has been over-emphasised. It has been said that for two years he spoke to no one but servants and railway officials. But this picture is more pathetic than true. A few friends visited him from London and from amongst the residents he was able to make one or two pleasant acquaintanceships. Occasionally he left his retreat to attend a concert or an exhibition in London. For the rest, his isolation was profound. Intelligent people, who would not be affrighted by the fantastic and who would have relished his company, had no inkling that he was living in Oxford. To-day, at his two addresses in "the High," he is not even a legend. He has been forgotten entirely. But, possibly, some Oxford housewife or shopkeeper used to notice a strange willowy figure mounting a bicycle and used to wonder who he was. Perhaps, as an indolent pedaller in "the Broad," he remains a memory in some obscure Oxford mind.

## CHAPTER VI

THE explosion of elation which burst over England at the signing of the Armistice, flinging up showers of hopes, desires, joys, and resolutions, sent up one tiny private hope for Ronald Firbank. Hovering above the chaos of four years, it shone portentously during the few months that he lingered on at Oxford. Europe would be the same again! Refreshed by his long hibernation, he would enjoy the spring-like gaiety of Europe after the war. The warm cities of the south, whose healing air he had missed in the cold, damp winters of Oxford, would welcome him again. Once again he anticipated the solemn delights of Egypt. The cities that he loved – London . . . Paris . . . Rome . . . Vienna . . . Constantinople – their names sounded infinitely caressing now that he was to be restored to them.

In the February after the war he was visited by Osbert and Sacheverell Sitwell, who had long known and admired his work. He was then engaged in writing *Valmouth*, a chapter of which, under the title of "Fantasia in A Sharp Minor," Osbert Sitwell published in *Art and Letters*. A few months later he decided to leave Oxford. As a gesture to signify that he was leaving a forced seclusion to take up his rôle of indolently critical spectator, he sold his library of books. It is certain also, although it is not recorded, that he sold his bicycle. The paraphernalia of life at Oxford was entirely discarded. He took rooms in Jermyn Street.

The theatres soon saw him again. A friend wrote :

“ I remember how much he enjoyed a play at the Haymarket that we saw together – *Frocks and Frills*. ”

As though to celebrate his delight in the release of the theatre from war conditions, he wrote *The Princess Zoubaroff*, a comedy which elegantly held within an archaic form the agelessness of wit and the timeliness of satire. Always he had loved the theatre, and it seemed apt that he should desire to hear the bland tones of his dialogue. His earlier effort, *The Mauve Tower*, may be put aside as the exercise of a talented youth, who felt vividly the visual beauty of the stage. The process of detachment which made it possible for him to write *Vainglory*, now enabled him to lose the formlessness of his theatrical experiment. He realised how vitally the theatre depends upon the portrayal of character. But it did not need more than one glance at the contemporary stage to warn him that characterisation unrestrained by a sense of style makes an imitation of life and is a reproach to the reality of the theatre. His master was Congreve. To read *The Way of the World* and *The Princess Zoubaroff* is to become aware of relationships stronger than those of blood and more enduring than those of contemporaneity. Across two hundred years Congreve and Firbank look from the same angle at a facet of life, from which they draw the same desire to make, in exquisite creations of people and events, a microcosmos bounded by the footlights and the flies and



subject only to the laws of fine wit and swift perception.

No managers rushed to secure the rights of *The Princess Zoubaroff*. This neglect was no greater than that he had suffered with his novels. But perhaps it seemed greater in view of the hopes engendered by the peace. It was in his mind that the play might appeal to one of the private producing societies. At a time when the Phoenix Society was reviving the Restoration comedies to enthusiastic audiences, it seemed pathetic that no one saw a potential audience for *The Princess Zoubaroff*. By the time the play was published, in 1920, Firbank must have known that his expectation was not to be realised. The world was not the same as it had been in July, 1914, and by the most optimistic outlook the signs of a return to pre-war conditions could not be found. There were furious recriminations between Governments, paralleled at home by bitter class hatreds. There were mad outbursts of spending, followed by a devastating period of poverty. The world was strident and strenuous. Only too clear was it that the comfort of the old order would return no more.

Even if it had been otherwise, the fact would have remained that Firbank himself had changed. His friends, most of them seeing him for the first time for five years, found a great and subtle difference. The manner was the same. He still sat curled in a chair ; he still turned up the collar of his coat when he was indoors and turned it down when he went out ; he still talked in a low gurgling voice, his

hands circling around his head, making a rhythmic commentary on his conversation; he still undulated down Piccadilly so that people stopped to stare as he passed; he still ate almost nothing and drank and drugged a great deal. But those who remembered him as an amusing, slightly ridiculous disciple of the cult of æstheticism, must have noticed that his wayward tastes were now under some control and that his rather childish enthusiasms were seldom apparent. While retaining the finest flower of his sense of absurdity, the quintessence of elegant impishness, he had contrived to widen his interests and deepen his sensibilities. To say this is, perhaps, to give the impression that he had become serious or sober or profound. He had not. He had grown up, but he had not lost his view of the comedy of life. At no time was Firbank anything but the gayest of jesters, to whom life was far too portentous to take seriously, and whose echo of the ridiculous would have deceived Ridicule herself.

To a certain extent Firbank was able to recapture the flavour of his pre-war life. The restaurants where he had spent his nights soon saw him again. The theatres were a constant pleasure. The advent of flying made trips to the Continent even more frequent than they had been in the years after he left Cambridge. His behaviour was still as singularly individual. About this time he celebrated Armistice Night by taking one of his Bohemian friends to a very sedate political club. There they drank hilariously and insisted upon remaining until the early hours of the morning. The next day, the one

clear impression which remained to them was the atmosphere of outraged decorum in which they finally made their exit. During the season he met Aldous Huxley, who has written :

“ I used to see him from time to time at the theatre when I was doing dramatic criticism. He often attended First Nights, in spite of an overwhelming shyness which made the presence of other people an agony to him. Sometimes the agony was so great that he would do extraordinary things that made him very conspicuous and so increased his self-consciousness, (e.g. he would get up in the middle of an act, or start rummaging under his seat). He must have derived some curious painful pleasure from his embarrassments. The last time I saw him was at Robert Nichols’s wedding. We sat with various other people in the Café Royal. As I took my seat at the table opposite him, Firbank gave his usual agonised wriggle of embarrassment and said :

“ ‘ Aldous – always my *torture*. ’ ”

“ Which must, I think, have been his spontaneous reaction to most people, at any rate at first. ”

Holt Marvell, who knew and loved the old “ Café,” has written :

“ Ronald Firbank is dead. He was truly a *habitué* of that faded, jaded room. Some days he sat from noon till midnight in his accustomed seat – to the right as you swing through the door. A thin man with a black felt hat. A narrow man and

restless – writhing like a basket of serpents. Clutching at the lapel of his coat, dipping his head like an embarrassed governess. Always paying for drinks. . . . ‘ My dear, I saw a crossing sweeper in Sloane Street to-day with the eyes of a startled faun ! ’ . . . ‘ My dear, when you talk like that you give me a distinct feeling of plush ! ’ It was he who gave me the life story of the lavatory attendant at the Café whose children were never told about their father’s profession until they were sixteen and old enough therefore to know the facts of life. To an undergraduate, hoping to find the Café Royal the embodiment of all that was most fine and free and desperate, Firbank seemed, in his appearance and his talk, to keep alive a little of the spirit of the nineties. He was friendly and generous and tolerant of the conversation of undergraduates. Because of his charm, his queer uncoiling movement and his mannered, coloured talk, one undergraduate at least bought *Valmouth* meaning to read it in the train.”

These memories of Firbank in the Café Royal bring to mind Miss Siquier’s visit, in *Caprice*, when she sat drinking China tea and eating a bun with currants in it, listening to the conversations of “ stage folk, artists, singers.” She felt drawn to speak.

“ ‘ Can you tell me how I should go to Croydon ? ’ she asked. The words came slowly, sadly almost.

“ ‘ To Croydon ? ’

“ ‘ You can’t go to Croydon.’

“ ‘Why not?’

“ ‘The young man of the whiskers looked amused.

“ ‘When we all go to Spain to visit Velazquez——’

“ ‘Goya——!’

“ ‘Velazquez!’

“ ‘Goya! Goya! Goya!’

“ ‘... . We’ll set you on your way.’

“ ‘Goose!’

“ ‘One goes to Croydon best by Underground,’ the pale-looking girl remarked.

“ ‘Miss Siquier winced.’

His friends heard again his hysterical laughter. He knew it was a shy man’s most valuable weapon. When C. R. W. Nevinson was leaving for America, a dinner was given in his honour. Firbank, as a friend of Nevinson, was invited. With typical contrariness he broke his rule of refusing to attend soirées and banquets and took his place at the principal table. During dinner his behaviour was exemplary. The valedictory address was delivered by an eminent journalist, who took advantage of the occasion to embark upon a sea of rhetoric. Period crashed upon period, working to a brave cadenza of farewell. Subdued and indefinite noises were heard. The speaker continued, undisturbed. But the noises grew louder and took shape as a rush of shaking, irresistible laughter. All eyes were turned on Firbank. In his nervousness, perhaps, he aggravated the noise by stuffing a handkerchief into



his mouth, until the sound became a muffled booming. The eminent journalist was still wishing the famous artist "God speed," but obviously he was labouring under difficulties. Firbank shook with uncontrollable mirth. At last he left the room.

Although he sat in his accustomed place at the Café Royal and jested as easily as ever, he had left the old casual life far behind. His work occupied the central place in his thoughts. *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, which he was now writing, was using all his most delicate perceptions. At this time he seemed to give some thought to his relation to the reading public. His neglect by critics and readers gave him no encouragement to write. Perhaps in the hope of convincing the critics of their error, he allowed a friend to arrange a dinner at which he was to meet some of the despised reviewers. The idea was that if they found him a gracious host and charming companion, they might think more kindly of his next book. The dinner was arranged to take place at the Savoy. Firbank was in a frenzy of nervousness. As soon as the critics had arrived, he drank several glasses of champagne and subsided beneath the table. The critics ate the dinner and remained blissfully unaware of the publicity campaign arranged for their benefit. This amused concern with what people thought of his work is found exemplified in a letter which he wrote at this time to Mr. Payen-Payne, a former tutor :



"I hope Mrs. Payen-Payne has not forgotten me and that my novels don't shock her more than perhaps just a little."

In June, 1921, he went to Versailles for the summer. In the house in Rue des Reservoirs he wrote most of *The Flower Beneath the Foot*. A friend who visited him there had the impression that he was more happy than at any time after the war. The spacious splendour of the town, set in the gay artifice of park and garden, seemed to soothe Firbank's restlessness. For a short time he was undisturbed by the pathological hysteria which so miserably wrecked the tranquillity of life in Paris and London. Perhaps it was that he was enjoying a transmigration to Pisuerga, where he studied in detail the lives and habits of Madame Wetme, Count Cabinet, Mrs. Montgomery, Laura de Nazianzi, and, in moments of special condescension, those even of her Dreaminess the Queen and King Willie. Certainly he carried this rare country and its orchidaceous people with him in the autumn to Montreux, where, under the trees by the green lake, they developed a warmth of blood and gaiety of mood unknown in western Europe. As the keen winds crept even over Lac Leman, he removed his creatures to Florence, where, the winter through, they flourished in his company. With none of his creations did he linger so long as with these of Pisuerga. Even when the warm breezes reminded him that at home people were beginning to think of Brighton or Bognor and that therefore it was time

for him to smell the tarry heat of Piccadilly, he still clung to his characters. They remained with him throughout his visit to Havana, and not until his return did he bring himself to part with the unique distinction of being their only friend. When at last the binder's covers, stamped with their passport, *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, had closed upon them, they became at once more and less his own. More his own, because the world, if it wished, was now able to hail him as the creator of the King, "who had the air of a tired pastry-cook," of Mademoiselle de Nazianzi, who taught herself to read so quickly "on the screens at cinemas," and of the Honourable Eddie Monteith and Mrs. Harold Chilleywater, who reflect reality in a dazzlingly distorted mirror. They became less his own because he knew with prescience that the world would bovinely disdain his offering.

While he was in Rome during the winter of 1922 a few friends offered him proof of their affection and esteem. They procured a life-size reproduction of the particular statue of Psyche which, through an accident, has lost the crown of its head and has, instead, a marble plateau. On this convenient memorial plaque they inscribed their names—Gerald Tyrwhitt, Evan Morgan, Aldous Huxley, and some others. With solemnity the statue was sent to Firbank at the Hotel Quirinale. He received it calmly, perhaps in the spirit of a master accepting homage from admirers of his art, perhaps as a slightly puzzled practical joker, suspecting that he was being pleasantly victimised. It was amusing

that a symbol of the spirit was sent to one whose concern was paramountly with *le mondanité*.

## CHAPTER VII

IN August, 1922, Firbank left London for Haiti. His departure, although sudden, was not unexpected. Some months before he had been telling Aldous Huxley of his intention to go to the West Indies to live among the negroes so as to collect material for a novel about Mayfair. His friends had noticed a growing interest in the black races. The number of his visits to coloured entertainments, such as "The Blackbirds," was a source of amusement to his friends and of discreet suspicion to his acquaintances. Many who met him after the war remember him best lying at an uncomfortable angle in the stalls at the Pavilion, his neighbours eyeing him nervously, while he waited, quite unconscious of the agitation around him, for the appearance of Florence Mills. He was happy in watching negroes. He loved their powerful vitality; their languorous sense of rhythm, waking to fierce movement with the flick of wrists and ankles; the dull gleam of oiled bodies; their range of muted colours—ebony, brown-black like iodine, blue-black like tar, bronze, wrinkled brown like an old morocco binding, the dull mouse shades where yellow is softened with grey. He watched the creole boys, fair, with a hint of green around the eyes and pink at the elbows and knees. Under the shadowless glare of footlights and battens, these

figures moved in unceasing rhythm, an endless excitement and a perpetual provocation. With the draughts from the stage, smelling of grease-paint, powder, and dust, came the heavy odour of human flesh, to rise in the theatre like incense to a pagan god. In swirling circles the dancers followed every jerk of syncopation, delighting in a primitive, animal merriment, to which the audience was forced to respond. The people who had come to the theatre as so many individuals, cool and compact as ice-bricks, found the sharp edges of their personalities yielding and rounding under the pressure of this insistent rhythm. Gradually they ceased to feel their isolation and became an entity having one mind and one purpose – to sway in unison, a thousand dark heads dipping in the drowsy gloom. There is no guessing if Firbank yielded his individuality and swayed with the crowd. While the sensual stimulus streamed through the theatre, beating eagerly upon everyone, its reception was private. No one could tell how much or how little his neighbour responded. Least of all could Firbank's neighbour have guessed.

He was away three months and visited Haiti, Havana, and Barbadoes. Moving indolently through unfamiliar scenes, he accepted all impressions. The colour and form of the scenery, the manners and customs of the people, their talk, he allowed everything to remain on the retina of his mind. When he came to record his impressions in *Sorrow in Sunlight* he remembered the dark savannah as vividly as he did “the brainy district” of the city

of Cuna-Cuna, and he pictured "Mamma Luna" in the tiny tropical village as truly as "Madame Ruiz" in the modish *faubourg* of Farananka. In his prose he caught the fascination of negro rhythms.

"The Latest Jazz, bewildering, glittering, exuberant as the soil, a jazz, throbbing, pulsating, with a zim, zim, zim, a jazz all abandon and verve that had drifted over the glowing savannah and the waving cane-fields from Cuna-Cuna by the Violet Sea, invited, irresistibly, to motion every boy and girl."

Amongst the natural phenomena which caught his attention were the miraculously shaken cocktails of Havana ("the surpassing excellence of thy Barmen, who shall sing?") and the prevalence of sexual diseases amongst the natives.

At the end of his stay with the negroes he went straight to Bordighera, where he spent the winter preparing his material for *Sorrow in Sunlight*. During this preliminary work he made a definite break with his earlier method of writing. Till then he had built up a framework of amusing incidents and witty snatches of conversations, around which the story was plastered on. It was like putting up a ferro-concrete building. This device, at best a vivid reflection of life, at worst a flat imitation, produced the rather uncomfortable air of mock reality, which took some of the fresh gaiety from *Vainglory*. The method of his later books was little concerned with imitations of people and their conversation. The importance was transferred to created character



and vividly imagined dialogue. The Mouth family in *Sorrow in Sunlight*, are bewilderingly, deliciously fantastic, jolting their way through colossal, exotic vegetation to the city of Cuna, "full of charming roses, full of violet shadows, full of music, full of Love, Cuna . . . !" It is impossible to believe in the actual existence of these laughing niggers, whose low, rolling speech seems made to conceal a thousand innuendoes. But, the more on that account, it is possible to believe in them as creatures of Firbank's imagination. Unlike the characters of his earlier books, they are fully drawn, they have depth, they are observed in the round.

*Sorrow in Sunlight*, although one of the first works of the modern negro vogue, still impresses by reason of its witty sanity. It belongs neither to the Ku Klux Klan nor to Harriet Beecher Stowe. And most emphatically does it not belong to those modern novelists, dramatists, composers, and scenarists who have found a regenerating force for the world's art in a black dancer, a spiritual, a carved head from Benin City, or a simple little negro love-story. The material of the book is selected, the architecture designed, with tact and prudence and a sense of humour. There is no negro problem to be solved ; only the adventures of the Mouth family to be used to create a work which, in the words of Carl van Vechten, "hovers delightfully between a Freudian dream and a drawing by Alastair, set to music by George Gershwin."

From Bordighera he went to Rome, where he remained at the Hotel Quirinale until late in the



spring of 1925. *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, which had been so long in manuscript, now made its appearance, and it was soon followed by a short story in the Oriental style, called *Santal*. When he returned to London he suffered a reaction towards mysticism. The undercurrent was always present, but occasionally it burst through, like a stream surging from the darkness of the earth. This time it took the form of a superstitious belief in an Egyptian fortune-teller. This necromancer was established as firmly as the Delphic oracle. He gave opinions on every subject connected with his client. In a short time Firbank was unwilling to make any decision if he had not first consulted this man. He turned to him for guidance when he wished to sell a portion of the family estate which included a quarry. The fortune-teller's opinion was that the quarry contained valuable stone and that he would make a great mistake if he sold the land without having expert advice. He obtained a local opinion that the quarry was valueless, but he determined to visit the estate in person, accompanied by the greatest London authorities. On the day chosen for the visit he was suffering from a heavy attack of nasal catarrh. During the tedious train journey he found relief in rubbing his forehead and nose with a block of solidified eau-de-Cologne. Wherever he went during the day he left this block, and the party of experts was forced to wait on street corners while messengers were sent to look for it. In acute discomfort, but supported by the prophecy of the fortune-teller, Firbank followed the experts to the

quarry. He waited in eager silence while they examined the stone. As they drove back into the town he received their verdict that the quarry was quite valueless.

During the summer months which he spent in London, he was finding himself increasingly lonely. Some of his friends had married, and they found it difficult to reconcile Firbank and the placid atmosphere of matrimony. In any case he would have deliberately avoided their houses, as he was awkward and embarrassed in the company of women. His conversation, never fluent for more than a few moments, disappeared entirely in most female company. Others of his friends he met only to quarrel with them. C. R. W. Nevinson wrote :

“ I loved his sense of fantasy, he appreciated my life, we both knew each other to be absolute ‘ Men of the World,’ and in spite of a thousand acquaintances we were both the ‘ loneliest.’ A loathing of the mob, a capacity for drink, and a worship of beauty, all helped to make us friends, in moments of enthusiasm ‘ his only friend,’ which he always hastily denied again ! ”

When his friends attempted to break off the relationship, for their wives’ sake or some other reason, he conveyed sharply, by his manner, that he did not care whether he ever saw them again. In this mood he was once guilty of a melodramatic reply to a friend who asked if he felt lonely. With a gesture, he said :

"I can buy companionship."

That he was not always able to save his absurdity with his wit is revealed in an anecdote from a friend of this period.

"Once or twice we had supper together at the Eiffel Tower, and he would get wildly excited and murmur faster and faster while his voice dropped lower and lower. Champagne went straight to his head, and, when he became slightly drunk, he would lose all sense of direction and put caviare on the end of his nose instead of in his mouth.

"One night I had just put him in a taxi, and, as I shut the door, I said :

" 'Good night, Firbank.' "

"The taxi moved off, but before I had had time to move, there was a violent rattling and banging and the taxi stopped. Firbank leaned out of the window and called to me.

" 'I wish,' he said, 'you wouldn't call me Firbank ; it gives me a sense of goloshes.' "

"Then he drove away down Rathbone Place."

#### CHAPTER VIII

ON March 25, 1924, Firbank's mother died. His affection for her had remained constant from early boyhood. It was the one emotional contact not only which he preserved, but which gave him real joy. Lord Berners has wisely said :

"I don't think he wished for intimacy. I think

he was terrified by the idea of being subjected to any kind of tie or obligation."

Yet at Cambridge he showed so much affection for his mother that A. C. Landsberg wrote :

"I remember that he seemed to be very fond of his mother and to admire her tremendously. I gathered that she was in every way a great and beautiful lady."

And, in July, 1920, when a friend invited Firbank to dinner, he replied :

"Unhappily, Saturday 31st is my last night in London before leaving for Italy and I will be with my people."

He returned from Rome during his mother's illness and was in London when she died. Grief was not an emotion which had an easy place in his nature. When it came, it made him eager for sympathy. He went to Lincoln's Inn in search of Albert Rutherford. They had not met for years, but in Paris, before the war, they had been close friends. When he arrived he saw Mrs. Rutherford, who told him that her husband was very ill and could not be seen. He stood as though paralysed by this new blow. At last he said :

"My mother died this morning. I knew Albert would understand. And now *he* is ill."

In a sort of despair he turned and left without another word.

After the funeral he went back to Rome. He busied himself with arrangements for the publication

of *Sorrow in Sunlight*. To an English publisher he wrote, "I bring you the book. It is . . . rather like a Gauguin." Its negro interest suggested that it might have an American market, and he offered the manuscript to Brentano's of New York. A difference of opinion occurred over the title. Firbank's own choice was *Sorrow in Sunlight*, "although," he wrote, "the book is extremely gay." The publishers wished to call it *Prancing Nigger*. Early in 1924 he wrote :

"I am still sufficiently vague as to the American publication of *Sorrow in Sunlight*. The title in New York will be *Prancing Nigger* (after a character in the story), which they suggest will sell 'at least a thousand more copies' than if the book were called *Sorrow in Sunlight*."

Although he allowed himself to be persuaded to make the change, his sense of the rightness of his own choice was so strong that he insisted on *Sorrow in Sunlight* being used for the English edition.

Due to the flamboyant title or not, the American edition sold well. For the first time Firbank tasted the pleasant fruits of success. He was simply, almost childishly, pleased by the appreciations of his talent which appeared in the American Press and letters which were sent to him from enthusiastic readers. Particularly he was excited by the praise of men like Carl van Vechten, Philip Moeller, and Stuart Rose. Soon after the publication of the book, Philip Moeller visited Firbank in Rome. The story of that meeting, charmingly told in a



letter Moeller wrote to van Vechten, is here in full.

“ROME,

*June 6th, 1924.*

“CARLO CARO—

“Your letter took me instantly to Palazzo Orsini. It was all quite bewildering. Nothing more so than the delicious wiggly bewilderment of Firbank himself. The doorman insisted that he was in and led me to two stories over a beautiful court to knock for myself. I stayed and knocked. It seemed a pity to bruise the beautiful door, deep gold and shining like old wood shines that the years have polished. I did want to see him, as probably I'll be leaving Rome to-morrow for Subiaco, where a friend of mine is teaching in a monastery.

“And then the door opened and I knew instantly that it was he. No one but he could have so delightfully seemed to get behind himself. Then he began to read the letter, drifting as he did so into three different places. Apparently I had awakened him. I was abject and in my abjection I did my best. He seemed to be responsive. I thought that any moment his leg would lift in an unexpected wriggle and wind about his neck. I have never seen anyone seem to droop so in fifteen different ways and still stay standing. He said you had been so charming. I told him you were a sort of high priest of the cult and he squirmed like a very sly lizard, in a sort of oncoming and, at the same time, reticent delight. He graciously asked me to dine with him to-night. Of course, I was delighted, but begged him to



work out whether or no the mood was really auspicious. I apologised for breaking in in so hideously abrupt a manner and explained that I knew perfectly how stupid things like that could be—— Yes, that I understood that maybe the moment wasn't a very blessed one. But I think we were getting on. I am not sure he wasn't standing on his left ear when he gurgled in a syncopation of tiny gasps that it was 'all perfectly wonderful.' By that time we were in his apartment and he told me to sit down, and when I sat down he got up and then I got up and he didn't. And then, as he didn't, he did. Then I said :

“ ‘ But you haven't read all of Carl's letter.’ ”

“ And then he began reading your note to me and then he said :

“ ‘ Oh – you wrote *Madame Sand*. How divine ! ’ ”

“ And then, with a glance of despair about him, he suddenly ejaculated :

“ ‘ But there aren't any flowers ! None ! None ! Perhaps it doesn't matter. I am moving out. I have been hunting places. It's all too dreadful ! Nothing matters. Do sit down. Yes, it will be charming to-night. Where shall we go ? How hot Rome is – but how cold your winters are ! To-night, then.’ ”

“ Then I said again :

“ ‘ I shall be delighted.’ ”

“ And we were out in the little hall and he made a terrific pounce and closed a door – a trunk, actually a trunk, in the next room had been visible. He seems to be delightful, but my only impression so

far is that if he suddenly stood still, I don't think he would be there. I look forward to the dinner quiveringly, don't you?"

Unfortunately, Philip Moeller did not write another letter to describe the details of the dinner and so he remembers the first meeting more vividly. "The name of the restaurant I have forgotten," he wrote recently, "but I know it was opposite the most fashionable of the Roman churches – the chic shrine of Catholicism, if I may so word it. We sat in the back room of the restaurant; as I remember, it was beyond two or three other rooms and the walls were frescoed with fruits and flowers and, I think, vistas of the Italian scene. I did my best to be practical with an omelet, if I remember rightly; but all that Firbank ate were peaches and champagne. Yes, I am sure of that – innumerable peaches and a bottle or two of champagne."

The success of *Prancing Nigger* led to a tragedy which is here related in Lord Berner's words:

"Ronald Firbank was coming to luncheon with me one day in Rome.

"It was shortly after the publication of *Prancing Nigger*.

"Thinking I heard Ronald approaching the house, a sudden impulse seized me to put on a Negro Mask and surprise him by appearing at one of the windows.

"However, it was not Ronald after all. And a

small boy who happened to be passing on a bicycle looked up and was so frightened that he fell off and was run into by a motor.

“ He was luckily unhurt – but a crowd collected.

“ At this juncture Ronald himself arrived, and when I explained to him what had happened he said, ‘ That will teach him to concentrate in future.’ ”

In the late autumn of 1925 he arranged to go to Egypt. He seemed perceptibly weaker in health. His cough was monotonously insistent and his breath often came in short gasps. Some of his friends, alarmed by his symptoms, urged him to visit a doctor. For a time he vacillated – he had a horror of doctors – but one day he agreed to go. An appointment was made and everyone wondered if he would keep it. His friends awaited the diagnosis with anxiety. The night of the interview Mr. and Mrs. Nevinson arrived rather late at the Café Royal and found Firbank, drunk and hysterical, the centre of undesirably prominent attention. He was weeping. As the Nevinsons hurried to him he cried out :

“ I don’t want to die ! ”

They consoled him as best they could and determined to remove him from the publicity of the Café Royal. With some difficulty they got him to a car and drove to the Tour Eiffel. Away from the crowds he was calmer. They persuaded him to eat a little. When he had done so he recovered considerably. He seemed grateful to them for the care they had taken of him. Knowing that he was safe

in the kindly charge of M. Stulik, they left him for the night. Early the next morning he was knocking on the door of their studio. He was alert and excited. He said he had come to ask for his scarf, which he thought he had left in the car the night before. The car was searched, but no trace of the scarf could be found. Probably he had left it behind at the Café Royal. Firbank became very agitated. He was certain he had had the scarf in the car, and he hinted pointedly that his rescuers knew more about it than they admitted. They laughed at such a suggestion, but Firbank was convinced. With high dignity he walked away, and until the time of his departure for Egypt he refused to speak to them.

His suggestion to spend the winter in Egypt seemed wise. His friends thought that the warmth would effectively combat his ailment. It was at the Tour Eiffel that he spent his last night in England. He arrived early in the morning and sat alone in a corner drinking cocktails. He refused to eat, as he did not wish to spoil his appetite for dinner. When dinner-time came he took a caviare sandwich and a bottle of champagne. He said his final farewells to his friends. He was nervous and they were faintly amused. As on many previous occasions, his fortune-teller had warned him that he was making his last journey. Those who were acquainted with this ridiculous and morbid ritual had no premonition that at last superstition had chanced upon the truth.

The avidity with which the Americans read

*Prancing Nigger* suggested that they would like his earlier books. Brentano's published a corrected edition of *Vainglory* in the autumn of 1925. Firbank was delighted when two American authors, Stuart Rose and Thurston Macauley, considered the project of dramatising *Prancing Nigger*. He gave them permission to use his book as they desired, and he was keenly interested in the play which they made. It took the form of a colourful extravaganza, to be played against a shifting background of jazz rhythms. Narrative was abandoned in favour of a vivid series of kaleidoscopic views. The important accessories of music and scenic designs were prepared for a possible production, which, however, has yet to be given. Although Firbank had never visited America, he began to think seriously of writing a book on the manners and customs of New York. In November, 1925, he wrote to Brentano's from Cairo :

"This winter, in Egypt, I propose to begin my book on New York, and as I never was there you may be sure it'll be the New Jerusalem before I've done with it. However, I hope to come out next year to develop it all."

Seven weeks later he wrote :

"I have just begun the second chapter of my American novel and it ought to be amusing. Is there such a thing as a dictionary of American slang and colloquialisms? I expect to be soon in sore need of a few really racy words - expressions of the *soil*."



A copy of Mencken's *The American Language* was sent to him. In the same letter he ventured to give an opinion upon the comparative merits of his books.

"Would you be inclined to do *Valmouth* or *Caprice* in the spring? Possibly I could improve *Valmouth* here and there by modifying certain passages. I have also written an entirely new, and as yet unpublished, dinner-party chapter scene for *Inclinations*, if this would suit you better; but of the three novels, I believe *Caprice* would find most favour with the public, although *Valmouth* is more finished and complete."

A sentence in a letter to C. R. W. Nevinson from Egypt proves how seriously he considered taking a trip to America. He said:

"I am anxious to get to New York before this cough gets me."

This Faustian picture of a game of hide-and-seek with Death, like a sequence from a German film of the best period, was ludicrous even to the participator. Death seldom intruded into his work. But when St. Laura de Nazianzi saw the great crowds gathered for her lover's wedding, the street paved with heads, she reflected, "Just so shall we stand on the Day of Judgment."

And Charlie Mouth's heart stopped still when he thought of heaven hereafter.



In Egypt, Firbank finished writing the book which he had commenced during his visit to Spain in the summer of 1924. Often the appearance of places and people gave him the initial impetus, the first glimpse which enabled him to see how amusingly related were some casual names and happenings. In this case, although he could write :

“Spain! The most glorious country in God’s universe. His admitted masterpiece, His gem,”

it is certain that the absurdities and incongruities were not first in his mind. When he said of himself :

“His work calls to mind a frieze with figures of varying heights all trotting the same way,”

he had not written *The Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli*. It was something more vital than snatches of conversation, more definite than impressions of events, which formed the mainspring of his last book. It was a character and a plot. The figures do not all trot one way ; they circle around the Cardinal as though for the celebration of a Rabelaisian rite. Indeed, their antics at the Cathedral of Clemenza during a fashionable ceremony – a christening, and not a child’s – are worthy of the supreme Master Francis himself. Some, however, have noticed that, in spite of their graceful movement and their witty speech, there is around them a darkening atmosphere, an incensation connected with strange and phallic ritual. In the midst of this “Sarabandish

and semi-mythic dance" stands Don Alvaro, the Cardinal, the pivot of all its macabre gaiety. If there is "a Firbank character" it is the Cardinal. He is compounded of wit and grace, corruption and prurience, in such nice proportions that, on reflection, the whole book is tinted by his prismatic colours of decay.

Those who will may see in *Cardinal Pirelli* the signs of change affecting Firbank's work. They may notice that plot was ceasing to be a framework to carry an amusing fancy dress; it was changing into the bones and muscles of a corporate body. Even more may they notice how Time cooled the first exuberance, so that the prodigal fecundity of the early books, each teeming with characters, has given place to a rich reservation, whereby Pirelli and his friends could move freely, unjostled by the crowd. But most of all, the observant will have noticed that the distance from the chaste château of little Odette to the end of the Cardinal, lying "nude and elementary now as Adam," while above him stirred the wind-blown banners in the nave, makes a long and subtle journey, accomplished by the aid of innuendo and covert suggestion. It is idle to guess at the next stage, but the certainty that his admirers would have revelled in its free and delicate humour is only enhanced by the thought that it would have earned the distinction of causing a conference between the Home Secretary and the Director of Public Prosecutions.

Firbank returned from Egypt to Rome in the spring of 1926. He stayed at the Hotel Quirinale.

The story of his last days and death is fully told by Lord Berners elsewhere in this book. Firbank died on May 21st and was buried in the Testaccio Cemetery.

Within a few weeks rumours were current, both in England and America, that he was not dead. It was suggested that he was perverse enough to test the reaction of his death upon the literary world. So, said the legend, he was wandering in distant lands, like Ambrose Bierce, enjoying with cynical amusement his obituary notices. The rumours were given encouragement by an article in *The New York Evening Post* in October, hinting that there was no actual proof of his death. The excitement which prevailed in New York convinced the papers that they had found a first-class literary sensation. They played the solemn farce out to the end. The Rome correspondent of *The Evening Post* was instructed to pay a formal visit to examine the city archives. He found duly recorded the death and burial of Ronald Firbank.

It seems opposed to the very spirit of Firbank to end his biography on an impressive minor chord. To write his epitaph would be the final irony to one of whom Philip Moeller has said that "he, of all people, cared least whether he was alive or dead." Let his farewell be his own words, strangely and beautifully appropriate :

"Now that the ache of life, with its fevers, passions, doubts, its routine, vulgarity, and boredom, was over, his serene, unclouded face was a marvelment to behold. Very great distinction and

sweetness was visible there, together with much nobility, and love, all magnified and commingled."

#### POSTLUDE

THE biographer is frequently accused of vulgarly attracting attention to his subject's private life and obscuring real appreciation of his public work. A life of Firbank is particularly open to this charge. As an author he experimented but announced no doctrines, published no manifestos and converted no disciples, while in his life he was the prey of the fashionable paragraphist and was believed to court the most glaring notoriety. The biographer of Firbank would have performed two good services if he could preserve the authentic eccentricity but disperse the cloud of foolish legend, and if, through the interest of the life, he could send everyone to the writings. For – let there be no misunderstanding – there are ten reasons why Firbank should be remembered. They are his ten books.

The spur to biographical endeavour is the certainty that, just as Firbank's books are full of himself, his life was charged with potential fiction. On the one hand, in *Vainglory* he appears as "Claud Harvester," the writer whose style "was as charming as the top of an apple-tree above a wall"; in *The Flower Beneath the Foot* he is himself, moving as a discreet influence through Mrs. Bedley's circulating library; while in *Sorrow in Sunlight* discretion has become almost impersonal and he exists as the exotic name of an orchid, "a dingy lilac blossom of

rarity untold." On the other hand, many of the episodes of his life read like dashing improvisations of a new novel. They are curious and remote, with tender sophistication and outrageous simplicity. But alas ! who but himself could have used them, placed each in position to add another sparkle to his glittering mosaic. To write of him one needs must be as detached as himself. From a pinnacle between heaven and earth, within easy reach of Parnassus and Piccadilly, one may find the gay solitude wherein to appreciate his aloofness. There his plots should be examined, judging them as exquisite designs of coloured stone. The connoisseur would notice the freshness and grace of *Caprice*, like an early Greek design ; the heavy outline and bold colouring of baroque *Vainglory* ; the dainty sadness of *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, like a Persian miniature ; the grim riot of *Cardinal Pirelli*, full of mediæval lust and laughter

To mention his titles is to bring crowding back to the memory the fantastic creatures who people his books. They have every grace and scarcely a virtue, the gayest of manners to gloss their contempt of sobriety. There is the Mouth family, who are able to be the most negroid of amusers as well as the most amusing of negroes ; " Mrs. Shamefoot," wrapt in her desire to be commemorated by a stained glass window ; " Miss Compostella," an actress, " although so private looking " ; the portentous figure of " Mrs. Yajnavalkya," most dubious of masseuses ; " Princess Zoubaroff," who harboured a desire " to shake Switzerland, because



there are no mountains as high as I could wish." These are the stars around whom gather hundreds of brilliant supers, who live in the mind not for what they say but for what they are called – "George Kissington," "Miss Thumbler" the dancer, "Mrs. Asp," "Lady Blueharnis," "Mrs. Wookie," "Lady Pantry," "Madame Wetme," and the others, whose every name is a prelude to delighted laughter.

It is the tragedy of wits that their polite motley is always supposed to conceal a Salvationist's uniform. The public turn his jokes inside out looking for the moral – and when he deals in *doubles-entendres* it is not difficult to mistake his meaning. Firbank, fortunately, was hardly suspect for a moment. The most earnest could find little that was uplifting in his humour, and if they could understand his *doubles-entendres* they were quite convinced that he was undesirable. From this has spread the belief that he has been misjudged and misunderstood. It must be emphasised that he hoped he would be misunderstood by certain people. It would have been his bitterest condemnation if they had understood him. In an age when earnestness and sincerity were marketable virtues, Firbank was an exception who provoked vain questions. Was he ingenuous or ingenious? What was his purpose? The questioners would not be satisfied with groping answers, with attempts to fit words to the startling uniqueness of his reactions. They expected, and still expect neat replies, whereby the work of Firbank may be parcelled and docketed,



ready to be delivered to future purchasers. The true admirer, expecting no ready-made labels, will ask himself if Firbank's purpose was to be amusing and satirical and fashionable. Certainly Carl van Vechten described him as "plus chic que le futurisme." But the same admirer also called him "the Pierrot of the Minute," a title which suggests a simple belief in a clear-sighted æsthetic. In that title there is a gay, sun-flooded vision of crisp humour, pricking innuendo, and elegant control of limb and mind, which reveals a quality very near the essence of Firbank. What is that essence? If it may not be found by direct statement, may it not be tracked in other sources? It must have been in Aristophanes's actors; to a degree it is in the Greek anthology; the *Commedia dell'Arte* surely knew it; Congreve was crossed with a strain of it; Wilde and Whistler had heard of it, but only above the sombre preaching of Tennyson and Browning; to-day it is more easily found in French music and painting than in any literature, though it would be churlish to deny that Max Beerbohm, Guillaume Apollinaire, Norman Douglas, and Aldous Huxley have found some of its engaging charm. It is the authentic light touch – light of hand, light of heart, light of wit, light of mind. Firbank is the impudently illegitimate descendant of all the witty jesters who have seen wisdom in folly.

Even the fashionable paraphrasiſts noticed the light touch. If English, they called him "smart and stylish," while the Americans established his "up-to-dateness" by the adjectives "cunning"

and "cute." Through the influence of such descriptions the legend grew in England of his elegant exclusiveness, while across the Atlantic our cousins fostered an image of a charmingly precocious child. Both reveal what errors of judgment can be made by the arbiters of taste. Indeed, the reception of Firbank's work is a pathetic example of the obtuseness of the professional critics. It is in the nature of things that every summer they must miss at least one swallow, but the cold discouragement with which they neglected this rare and delicious creature is hard to condone. Perhaps they felt perturbed that so mocking a cry was concealed by vivid plumage. Certainly he was farcically misjudged by those who did not understand him and vaguely feared by those who did. His humour, informed with a free and ample spirit, the heritage of the world's comic masters, was gravely questioned. His critics were wise enough to know that a passage of wit, taken from its context and placed in the midst of sentences of condemnation, had an air as forlorn as Mirabell's "eye of a dead whiting," and was as certain to kill appetite. How full of relish are the same passages when encountered in their places, as orderly as the courses of a well-planned dinner!

" 'Whenever I go out,' the King complained, 'I get an impression of raised hats.' "

"It was seldom King William of Pisuerga spoke in the singular tense, and Doctor Babcock looked perturbed.

" 'Raised hats, sir? ' " he murmured in impressive tones.



RONALD FIRBANK  
from a drawing by AUGUSTUS JOHN, R.A.



“ ‘Nude heads, doctor.’ ”

No passage was more viciously abused than chapter twenty of *Inclinations*. With a brevity which is as witty as it is graphic, it carries the reader from the contemplation of Mabel Collins's plot to elope to its actual accomplishment. But all that it says is :

“ ‘Mabel! Mabel! Mabel! Mabel!

“ ‘Mabel! Mabel! Mabel! Mabel!’ ”

If his humour was scorned, his plots were piloried. The critics confessed that his books were meaningless to them, and then proceeded to drag unwilling stories from the texture of his writing. Is it possible that the critics of another age thus hailed the first appearance of *Incognita*; that, in spite of Congreve's warning that “when I digress, I am at that time writing to please myself; when I continue the thread of the story, I write to please the Reader,” they wrenched from its context this thread of plot, with which to entice readers? Or because Congreve had warned them of his pleasure in the digressions, did they solemnly praise the parts they liked least? But Firbank never warned his critics of his preferences, never hinted to them that perhaps they would mistake his intention if they placed importance upon his plots. Once he said of his characters that “if one should by chance turn about it is usually merely to stare or to sneer or to make a grimace. Only occasionally his figures care to beckon. And they seldom really touch.”

But that hint was hidden in one of the books

which the critics did not understand! So they continued to point to the incoherence of *Inclinations*, and failed to see how easily the figures trotted through the book, preserving the unhesitating movement of a Greek frieze. They complained of the riot of characters in *Vainglory*, and lost entirely the sense of a hot and overcrowded drawing-room which pervades the book.

The irony which he used with deadly effect served him ill when it decreed that his peculiar excellence of style should be most stupidly misunderstood. Much as a composer adds emphasis and strength to his symphony by "thickening" his part-writing, so Firbank created a method of treating dialogue, by which was traced a pattern of sound, not polyphonic in character, but built upon subtle contrasts and delicate resemblance; a pattern, indeed, derived from the French composers Debussy, Fauré, and Ravel, whom he admired so much. Each book contains an inimitable example of this technique, but chapter four of part two of *Inclinations* is the most richly typical. The intimate dinner given by Mrs. Collins overflows with conversation, but each stray interjection has its place in a scheme of audible arrangement. At least one of the readers of *Vainglory*, as long ago as 1915, discovered the secret of reading Firbank.

"You can imagine how puzzled I was by its style," wrote Professor E. J. Dent, "but I enjoyed it hugely, and discovered at once that it was a book to be read aloud."

The definite disapproval which characterised the



official attitude to Firbank's work was no isolated phenomenon. It had its place in the literary lay-out of England during the years of the "Great" War. Simplicity and sincerity were the fashionable virtues. A nation at war could not be expected to have time for subtleties or sympathy with ill-timed jests. And yet the mystery of Lord Kitchener proved as enthralling as a detective story, and Daly's and the Lyric were packed every night. Poetry and drama were still recognised as means of escape for the masses of people who wanted to forget Flanders, but under war regulations all exits had to conform to standard pattern. Poetry was to be heroic – not blatantly patriotic, but, of course, on the side of right. It was to be tenderly reminiscent, recalling the pleasantness of England, and emphasising the eminent soundness of

*Oh! to be in England  
Now that April's there.*

The war provided evidence that, in the face of death, many have followed the example of Falstaff and "babbled of green fields." The theatre, also, had its war-work to do. Where else was light, colour, and gaiety to be found? It did not matter if the light was garish, the colour tawdry, and the gaiety a little thin. Men from the trenches were not particular.

It is miraculous how Firbank survived in such an atmosphere. He preserved his artistic integrity only by means of vigorous stimulation from the

stupidity of others. But it was not to be expected that he would be understood. An artist with rigid standards, an artist who would say nothing trite or trivially sincere, whose wit and gaiety were born of his fantastic approach to life, whose plots held in the form of arabesque the unique discernments of his mind, to whom zeal was the cardinal sin, such an artist was not welcome in England in wartime. Sixteen years after the outbreak of the war we may wonder if such an artist would ever be welcome in England. Yet he is essential. He is salutary. But for the irony of such artists as Firbank, sobriety and prudery and temperance would descend upon us like a black and stifling pall.

## RONALD FIRBANK

BY V. B. HOLLAND

It is difficult to say anything definite about anyone as vague as Ronald Firbank. There seems to be nothing to grasp hold of, merely a fleeting impression here and there, of his gestures, of his half-said phrases, of his laughter and his tangled hair. Yet these impressions remain and leave one with an idea of a very lovable person, a dreamer of rather material dreams from which he drew inspiration in writing his books. For his books are surely the product of dreams, written in that nebulous state of mind one is in just before fully regaining consciousness, while the dream still holds one with its spell, and its improbability and absurdity are not yet apparent.

A few days after returning to Cambridge at the beginning of the October Term 1906, I heard that an undergraduate had come up to my college—Trinity Hall—a Freshman indeed, but one who was already a full-blown author with a published book to his credit, and of whom it was rumoured that he was expecting to write a series of novels in the course of his university career.

In common with most other undergraduates I had, at that time, distinct literary aspirations, and I immediately decided to make the acquaintance of this enviable prodigy as early as was consonant with my recent dignity of a second year man. Calling etiquette at Cambridge was quite sufficiently

strict to be a nuisance. The first call could only be made by the senior member of the university upon the junior, irrespective of any social distinctions that might exist. There was no necessity for the caller to make sure that the callee was in; indeed, it was usual to take steps to ascertain that he was out. The junior returning the call, however, was compelled to go on calling until he found his host in. It is significant, therefore, of the awe inspired by this book, of which we did not even know the title, that those of us who called made sure beforehand that Ronald Firbank would be in. I do not remember if he ever repaid our calls officially, but I very much doubt it.

The only impression that remains to me of my first interview with Firbank is of his rooms. I cannot remember what we talked about, but he produced his book, "*Odette d'Antrevernes*, by Arthur Firbank," and gave me a copy with my name, wrongly spelt, and his initials A. R. F. on the fly-leaf. It was the first book I had ever possessed with a presentation inscription from the author: I have it still, and I have not, even yet, lost the sense of importance that its possession gave me when I first got it. His rooms were on the ground floor in the Main Court – the actual number was F.2 – and they were filled with unaccustomed things disposed in unusual places. The necessary sofa was not in its traditional place before the fire, but was pushed against the wall between the windows, and it was on a corner of this that Firbank liked to sit, his back to the light, his face in shadow,

his legs drawn up beneath him, one hand always fluttering around his head, the other usually grasping his ankles or a book. A refectory table stood in the centre of the room, giving it a feeling of depth which no doubt it did not possess. The room was always full of flowers all through the year: no one knew where they came from and apparently no one ever saw them coming into college: yet such an occurrence in a Philistine college like the Hall would be bound to excite comment, possibly of an active and even retributive nature, if it had been noticed.

Instead of the pictures one expected to find in undergraduate rooms in those unenlightened days, consisting, for the most part, of bad reproductions of sporting prints and of even worse pictures of insufficiently clad women, Firbank had Conder lithographs and paintings on his walls, and several etchings by Helleu, whom he had known in Paris. Paris! How impressed we were when he spoke to us of Paris. He had lived in Paris for a whole year by himself before coming to Cambridge. At least, so he said. Most of us had read *La Vie de Bohème*, and those who had not done so hastened to do so, at my instigation. For this was clearly the Paris of Murger, and Firbank was Rodolphe himself. Really I suppose the Paris in which Firbank had lived actually was a form of rather pecunious Bohemia; it included Pierre Louÿs, Willy and Colette Willy, the actor de Max, the actress Polaire with her sixteen-inch waist, and many other celebrities, most of whom we heard of for the first time with carefully concealed ignorance. Firbank spoke

of these people with a kind of diffident familiarity, almost deprecatingly, and we, whose experience of Paris, if any, revolved round such centres as the Bois de Boulogne, the Louvre, and Notre Dame, absorbed every word. He always stopped his recitals with a wave of his hand and his far-away, rather hoarse laugh, just when they were beginning to reach what we imagined were about to be the most interesting parts, and left us to guess at mystery and romance. It was very tantalising, but very effective.

Firbank never played games, though he occasionally appeared in the costume of sport, apparently returning from some strenuous and probably purely imaginary form of exercise. Seeing him once clad in a sweater and football shorts, I asked him what on earth he had been doing: "Oh, football," he replied. "Rugger or Soccer?" "Oh, I don't remember" – and a laugh. "Well, was the ball round or egg-shaped?" "Oh! I was never near enough to it to see that!"

His knowledge of any form of game was negligible. Were he ever compelled to be present at any conversation about games his mind would disappear completely, to wander in some fantastic land of its own creation. We were once both bidden to a dinner-party by Monsignor Barnes, then Catholic Chaplain at Cambridge. An invitation from Monsignor Barnes had something of the nature of a Royal Command in its irrefusability, and Firbank, who hated dining out, felt compelled to go. The party consisted of about a dozen undergraduates, and soon after dinner began the conversation turned



upon a hockey-match that had taken place that afternoon, possibly between Cambridge and some rival university. Firbank's mind was far away, when a pause in the discussion brought him suddenly back to consciousness of his surroundings, and he beamed upon the undergraduate seated opposite him, nervously hoping that his mental absence had not been noticed. The undergraduate, confused by this unexpected sign of friendliness, felt that something was required of him and asked Firbank: "Were you there this afternoon?" Firbank coloured deeply, cleared his throat, and, clasping his hands together, glanced wildly round for help. He obviously had not the least idea of where he was suspected of having been, but, seeing every eye upon him, except possibly mine, for I knew the incident could not end well, he leant forward and replied in a voice trembling with assumed interest: "Oh, no! I'm so sorry. I wasn't. But *do* tell me. Was it wonderful?"

And that was the end of the hockey conversation.

Trinity Hall produced, and no doubt still produces, a magazine called *The Crescent*, coming out once a term. I edited this during Firbank's first year, and I asked him to contribute something to it. In due course I received from him a weird phantasy which was really the precursor of all his later books. The simplicity of *Odette d'Antrevernes* was left far behind. At this date I have not even the vaguest recollection of what the story was about, but I still retain the impression that it was manifestly unsuitable for an undergraduate magazine, and I rejected

it as tactfully as I could. I think Firbank was more indignant than hurt, though he pretended to be neither; but I am sure I was right by undergraduate standards. I returned the manuscript. I wish now that I had kept it; how seldom one appreciates the gifts of the gods at the moment of their bestowal!

The only undergraduate society to which he belonged at Cambridge was the Footlights (or it may have been the A.D.C.: as a member of neither, I am not competent to remember). He used to attend rehearsals regularly, and his opinions, as a man of clearly established literary reputation, based upon his published book, were listened to with respect. But his incurable shyness always prevented him from taking any active part in the performances, though he was often offered parts and used to read them through, and act them to himself in the secrecy of his rooms, before returning them.

I can imagine no college more inappropriate for Firbank than Trinity Hall at that period. We were a small college, about 130 strong, and we were Head of the River, a position which gave us, in our own eyes, a marked athletic superiority over every other Cambridge college. Any energy left over after our athletic duties were performed was devoted to a thoroughly inattentive study of the Law. One could not imagine Firbank as a lawyer; there was something singularly un-law-like, almost illegal, about him. He never took exercise, he never worked, he never sat for any examination, even the Little-go; yet he was never sent down or bullied by the

authorities ; I think the Senior Tutor, the late Mr. G. B. Shirres, a most charming and popular man, had a soft spot in his heart for him. And, strange as it may seem, his rooms were never "ragged" ; heaven knows why not ; it was the golden age of ragging ; everyone's rooms were ragged on one pretence or another ; excessive popularity was as good an excuse as excessive unpopularity, and excessive eccentricity was the best excuse of all ; so from the undergraduate point of view Firbank's rooms were an urgent invitation to a rag. I think that the reason they escaped was that in some way Firbank was beyond ordinary standards, and was therefore treated with the respect and awe frequently accorded by the simple-minded to things they do not quite understand.

He did not have a very great number of books in those days. He read a good many French novels, but as soon as he finished them he gave or threw them away. Most of his English books were poetry, especially poetry of the nineties. He was always enthusiastic about that period. Dowson and Condor, Arthur Symons and Beardsley, were his chief joys. He used to read poetry very slowly, often out aloud to himself, with long pauses to let the words and ideas sink into his mind. He preferred reading slim volumes which he could easily hold in his hand and slip, if interrupted, into his pocket. He liked, too, the look of slim books on his shelves. This preference for slim books seems to have persisted with him : once in 1918 he came to see me as I lay in bed in London with influenza.

He kept a safe distance between himself and me, and I realised how great an effort he must have made to come to see me at all, as he had a morbid and perfectly natural horror of infection ; but he brought with him half a dozen slim volumes of poems for me to read. Two of these I never returned : Walter de la Mare's *Songs of Childhood* and Ralph Hodgson's *Poems*. "I just picked them out of my bookshelves," said Firbank. "I remembered ; all the thin ones ; you used to like the thin ones best."

In May, 1909, just before we both went down for good, Robert Ross came up to Cambridge to see me and Firbank, and I gave a dinner in his honour ; endless was the consultation that took place about it. We discussed food at great length, though I have no doubt, from the menu, which I have before me, that, as was usual, the Trinity Hall chef did the actual choosing. We did, however, choose the guests ourselves, and there was a great deal of discussion about that too. We arranged to share the burden of the dinner-party so that I should be responsible for the food and Firbank should be responsible for the drink. The chief advantage of this arrangement was that Firbank possessed some 1884 Moët, originating, I think, from his father's cellar. There was quite a quantity of this, and it was just as well, as two bottles out of every three had departed this life apparently some years before, but when a bottle was good it was indeed good. The dinner took place in Firbank's rooms, and developed into quite a famous affair in later years. Several more or less literary men who were not

present have since told me how much they enjoyed the party, in undisturbed ignorance of the fact that I had anything at all to do with it, and some of them have described it to me in minute detail, to my intense interest. There were actually nine people present: Ronald Firbank, Robert Ross, Rupert Brooke, Mario Colonna, Ernst Goldschmidt, A. C. Landsberg, myself, and two gentlemen whose signatures I cannot decipher upon the menu before me, but who were clearly of no vast importance or I should have remembered their presence, or at any rate their names.

We were very proud of this party, for it was there that Robert Ross met Ronald Firbank, Rupert Brooke, and Mario Colonna for the first time. During dinner a violent altercation took place between Robert Ross and Mario Colonna over the way in which Colonna's father, then Syndic of Rome, did his job. Firbank, usually most pacific, joined in the argument and egged them on, taking alternate sides to prevent their ardour cooling.

Shortly after this we both left Cambridge, and I lost sight of Firbank for some months, until one day he came to see me and asked me if I could arrange for him to meet Ada Leverson, the Gilded Sphinx of Golden Memory. He was still absorbed in the nineties, and he was eager to meet "the Sphinx," upon whom all the stars of that period had glittered, however wanly. Anyone who had sat on the floor in the half-light of a studio party with Aubrey Beardsley would surely be able to give particulars of him which would not be within the



knowledge of his ordinary literary friends. So I called upon the Sphinx and told her of this young man and of his interest in her. The Sphinx, who was always, and indeed still is, perfectly charming, made an appointment to receive us on the following Sunday afternoon at 4 o'clock, and on Sunday I lunched with Firbank at his house, in preparation and anticipation. For the occasion he had procured a silk hat of Parisian proportions and the most remarkable pair of trousers then in existence; they were, as I see them now, mauve in *motif*, with black lines of varying thickness running down them. He was really "arrayed," in the noblest sense of the word, rather than dressed, and as we drove from Curzon Street to Radnor Street in a hansom cab his excitement infected me, and I was as nervous as he at the thought of the ordeal before us. We rang for some time at the door of No. 12 before we got an answer, and when we did get one it was in the form of the shattering words: "Not at home."

Firbank turned without a word and left me, and it was not until several days later that I saw him again and heard the rest of the tale. He was apparently under the impression that the Sphinx must have been looking out for us from an upper window and that the sight of his trousers had been too much for her and had decided her against the obvious risk of making his acquaintance: for aught I know this may have been the true explanation. Firbank seized the first hansom that passed and drove back to Curzon Street, where he removed the trousers and cut them up into small pieces, which he fed to his bedroom fire



all through the rest of that sad Sunday afternoon.

Shortly after this I left London, and for some years I lost sight of him. Indeed, except at rare intervals I saw very little of him for the rest of his life, to my very great regret. We used to correspond in a desultory way and make plans to meet, but they seldom came to anything. The last time I saw him was in London not long before his death. He telephoned to me one afternoon and suggested that he should come to see me. He arrived bringing with him a little Egyptian sandstone head which he had come across in Egypt before the war. He entered the room with it held out before him, and said: "I have brought you a present!" impulsively, with his painful infectious shyness. He sat on the sofa in the old attitude of Cambridge days, his legs drawn up beneath him and his hand waving around his head or half-hiding his face from view. He spoke of his work and about the letters he received about it from all parts of the world; it always gave him great pleasure to get letters about his books from strangers, as it made him feel that his work was appreciated outside his own immediate circle of admirers. "I have written twelve books now," he said. "I always meant to write twelve books and now I have done it. I am thinking of having a very limited edition done of my complete works. It would be wonderful to have one's complete works published whilst one is still alive. I don't think I shall write any more."

As he left the house I watched him walk diagonally across the street to the corner of the square, and

I thought how little he had changed since I first knew him. His hat on one side, his head tilted slightly into the air, the slow, swaying walk so peculiarly his own. And I shut the door with a deep regret and the unsatisfied feeling one has when parting with someone whom one has once known well but with whom one has lost touch with the passing years.

I always think of Ronald Firbank as an unhappy man who, luckily for him, had the power of expressing himself through his books. His brain was too tumultuous to allow him to express himself clearly in speech; his thoughts seemed to overlap one another, and whilst he was saying one thing the expression of his eyes gave one the impression that his thoughts had already shifted to some quite different plane. And then: "Oh! I don't know. Don't you see? It's so difficult. No, no, I can't explain!" and his nervous laugh, deep in his throat; and his hands moving rhythmically around his head.

His loss was a very real one even to friends like myself who saw so little of him during the last years of his life. The little Egyptian head which he gave me is a symbol to me of what he would have liked to be, in the calm beauty of its self-possession, the lack of which was Firbank's great sorrow in life. Whenever I look at it, I think of this queer, gentle, lovable creature, full of kindness and a desire for happiness, who, had he been bold and confident, would have been a type of Regency beau, but would have lost most of the mysterious charm he had for those who, like myself, are of coarser and more invulnerable clay.

## RONALD FIRBANK

BY AUGUSTUS JOHN, R.A.

IF I terrified Ronald Firbank, as he used to say I did, he often quite unnerved *me* with his way of emitting a long, hollow laugh about nothing in particular, a laugh like a clock suddenly "running down," accompanied by a fluttering of the hands (not the clock's), hands which he would then proceed to wash with the furtive precipitation of a murderer evading pursuit. Only rarely did his eye meet one's own, but when it did one was charmed by its brown and shy amiability; instantly deflected, however, behind the flushed bulge of his cheek-bone, the suitable look of humorous curiosity one had hastily assumed to meet it would glance ineffectually off the shining planes of his teeth, which he wore *à l'anglaise*, or else waste itself in the curly hair which crowned the apex of his back profile. His mother complained I had made him look almost an idiot with a head of such a shape, and received with only partial credulity my explanation that the illusion was merely due to the way he wore his hair. Lady Firbank, though, was quite sure Ronald was *clever*, but she did wish he would have somebody to look after him. He was always alone – even in company – except perhaps for the presence of some invisible familiar with whom he seemed to commune on terms of complete intimacy and understanding.

He was, in fact, not as other men. One day while posing for me (if you could call it posing), in his nervousness he let fall a little Egyptian divinity in lapis with which he had been occupying his hands. Instead of saying "Oh, bother" or something, as anyone else would have done, he glanced at the smithereens on the floor, remarking, "*There!*" just as if he had expected the disaster, and retired chuckling for another wash and brush-up. In his life as in his books he left out the dull bits and concentrated on the irrelevant. He made even *me* feel grossly realistic and matter-of-fact, and contact with him brought with it an element of discomfort only to be endured in a spirit of dog-like devotion. Indeed, the fragmentary sallies he would so often address to the apparently empty air were only to be met on my part by a kind of appreciative tail-wagging and a look of almost human unintelligence. Not that he didn't want sometimes to be "serious," but the effort involved was so great and the result so possibly compromising or even tedious . . . There was Death, of course – much too unpleasant to think about – or wasn't it? Firbank believed in himself. He knew he could write beautifully. He wasn't really in the least affected, but he did so want to look his best. He suffered – very bravely I think – under more than one serious disability; his health, of course, was not of the best; the dreadful fact that his father had been an M.P., and then his profile – was it *quite* perfect? The last time I saw him was in Bond Street after a long interval. I hailed, but not too heartily I hope, the elegant



RONALD FIRBANK  
from a drawing by AUGUSTUS JOHN, R.A.

[p. 114





slanting figure with the exquisitely poised bowler. He turned in alarm, screening his face with that beautiful hand, and, protesting that he wasn't "fit to be seen," writhed confusedly into the nearest shop. Sometimes I wonder if I should have boldly followed him, and, at the risk of appearing too robust, dragged him off somewhere for lunch. A series of cocktails, a shoot of asparagus, a bottle of wine or two, might have pulled him together, and we should have got on as well as usual, "or perhaps," as dear Ronald himself would have said, "not."



## RONALD FIRBANK

BY OSBERT SITWELL

It was in 1912 that, most unexpectedly, I found myself in the Army – or, at any rate, on my way to that goal by means of being attached to a cavalry regiment. There was no sign, no chance of a way out, except mutiny, which would end this existence for me by ending me ; and this seemed too drastic a remedy. Even a few hours' leave to London, away from the monosyllabic discussions on horses and dogs – discussions which regimental tradition prevented me from taking part in – was regarded with suspicion.

The regiment had an ancient history, yet assuredly was only now at its beginning, would continue indefinitely into the future. Never did I dream that which has now come to pass. For it was only a few weeks ago that I opened a paper, and read that it had been struck – as a good fairy at the end of a fairy story taps the wicked with her diamond wand and turns them all into toads and beetles – into a tank corps ; and of all that mute swagger and stupid insolence now lost in dull, mechanic routine, only their spurs are left to them.

It can, perhaps, be comprehended how, with but a few hours in which to look round, and even that with the black cloud of Aldershot hanging always

over one like the spectre of the Judgment Day for the evildoer, I strove to make the most of each minute, drinking in every detail of the performance and the audience, in order to elaborate them afterwards in my mind, luxuriating in the then new magic of "Boris" or "L'Oiseau de Feu," of the Futurist Exhibition at the Sackville Galleries or of the Second Post-Impressionist show in Grafton Street. Nothing of these escaped my eager mind. And always I noticed in gallery, opera-house or theatre – so that afterwards when back at Aldershot, pondering sadly over these few happy, intolerably distant yet so near, hours of happiness – the lonely stooping, rather absurd figure of a man some ten years older than myself. With a thin frame, long head, and a large, aquiline but somewhat chinless face, the cheek-bones prominent and rather highly coloured, showing that he was ill, he had something of the air, if one can imagine such a combination, of a witty and decadent Red Indian. And is it possible that there was, added to this, a touch of priest, or even curate? He haunted the background of my favourite scenes for me, just as those of Greco's pictures are haunted by a gaunt and spectral saint. The eyes of my phantom, I noticed, were full of wit, though he spoke never a word, being always alone. In the intervals he would stand at the bar, occasionally gulping down a drink, as though with difficulty, nervous and ill at ease, his long hands clutching the lapels of his coat, examining the correctness of his tie, smoothing his hair, or fluttering round him apprehensively. Rather ill and

unhealthy, one judged him to be ; but certainly, I decided, his silence differed from that of my brother officers. Often I would wonder who he might be, and why so much alone ; for it was before I myself began to understand all the terrible mysteries of the nervous system.

Times changed, and with them my regiment ; now I was stationed in London. And always, whenever I went, let us say, to the first performance of Scriabin's *Prometheus*, to a concert of Fauré's music conducted by the old composer himself, or to the first night of the *Rosenkavalier*, invariably would I see at it this curious figure. But never could I discover his identity.

Then the War came, with for me two winters in the trenches, and the diminutive spiritual paradise of books, music, and conversation into which I had recently found my way (in spite of constant drill and dull bouts of Pirbright and such places) was utterly smashed and broken. Thus one did not see him for several years : for there were no longer many, or even any, concerts in London at which – even if one could be present at them – to see this silent spectre. Indeed, music was under suspicion as a German agent.

It is impossible to remember quite when it was, but certainly towards the end of the "Great" War, that I opened a weekly review and read a short criticism of a novel called *Vainglory*. The critic owned manfully that he could make nothing of it, but fortunately quoted a short passage in which a mother describes a quarrel with her child's nurse.

To this day the quotation remains in my memory almost word for word, so much did it amuse me. Enchanted, we bought the book and all else that issued from the same pointed, absurd, yet indeed magic pen.

Here was to be found a new if minute world, which existed in its own pulse of time and exhibited its own standards of behaviour that thus could never for a moment be questioned. Strange, fresh tides of rhythm played and lapped round its breathless shores, on which figures, that, however etiolate, were sufficiently substantial for one never to be able to forget them, moved to their own measure and were left striking the most unexpected attitudes against the mauve and lime-green horizon. Each book, as it appeared, was a new revelation of style, and of a wit that rippled the surface of every page without ever breaking it. The virtuosity of the author was able to net any situation, however crazy or occasionally even obscene, and let it loose in the realms of a harmless reality; while just as in the autumn the silver cobwebs lightly cover the trees with a thin mist of impalpable beauty, so a similar highly stylised but intangible loveliness hung over every page, while wit ran in, round, and underneath each word.

However, alas, I am not here to write about these fascinating books . . . (how ably the very titles beckon to one – *Vainglory*, *Valmouth*, *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, *Caprice*, *Santal*, and *Prancing Nigger*) . . . but, difficult enough task, to attempt to pin down upon this paper that unrivalled butterfly



their author – a butterfly, indeed, which perhaps himself was the only writer who could have tackled successfully – and to record a little of him before it is forgotten, a little of a shy, charming, sad, comic, and unusual personality.

This first novel, then, filled us with curiosity about its author. Who was he, where did he live? we wondered. But for a while our search went unrewarded. The first information that reached us was through an old friend of ours, now, alas, like the subject of our enquiry, dead. She told us that he was the son of the late Sir Thomas Firbank, a noted railway magnate. Lady Firbank, a charming and beautiful woman, was at the time still alive. Both parents, it seemed, were conventional enough, so that the education of their son had been planned on the ordinary school-university model. But, when travelling in Egypt as a small child, he had been struck down with sunstroke and proved in consequence too delicate to remain at a Public School for more than one “half.” Incidentally, it was the sunstroke which later saved him from the necessity of active service, for he showed my brother the military certificate with regard to his exemption. At the age of eighteen or nineteen he had, however, been strong enough to fulfil their ambitions for him by going up to Cambridge. There he became an aesthete, and was particularly interested in every society connected with the drama. He had already published a first book<sup>1</sup> and it was at the time understood

<sup>1</sup> Firbank often in later years talked to me about his work, but never for one moment did he mention this book. He had always given me to understand that *Vainglory* was his first published volume. The title is

that he was engaged on an absolute masterpiece of a second book, for, like all decent and intelligent undergraduates, he held very strongly the opinion that a man was finished at twenty-five. In due course he left Cambridge, but no tale appeared. Years fled by – years spent in drifting round Spain, Italy, North Africa and the Near East – and nothing more was heard of a second book until, some ten years later, suddenly, now unexpectedly even, it swung into the literary firmament, with, for a new writer, an extraordinary mastery, within its scope, of words and technique, and with its own quaint but unbiased view of a mad world. His long sojourns and travels abroad he broke, she told us, by visits to London. Here he would usually take furnished rooms in the neighbourhood of Piccadilly. Since the war he was living in the country, but she was not sure where.

The next accurate information we obtained was from C. R. W. Nevinson, who had met him at luncheon with Grant Richards, Firbank's publisher. Nevinson had at once divined in him an amusing character. He described his appearance to us, I remember, and related how after the meal Firbank, rising willowly to his feet, observed, "Now I must go to the Bank." "But they are all shut, you won't be able to get in," objected Richards; to which Firbank, displaying his long unmuscular arms and

*Odette d'Antrevernes* and it was issued in 1905 by Elkin Mathews. It contains also "A Study in Temperament" – and though the name of the author is given as Arthur Firbank, this tale is said to be prophetic in style of the Ronald Firbank who was to come. Grant Richards later republished *Odette*, but without including in it "A Study in Temperament."

thin fingers, replied anxiously, "What? Not even with my crowbar?"

Soon we heard that Firbank was living at Oxford, and when, in the February after the war, I went there to see my brother, we decided to call on him. Only now was it that I realised who he was, this silent, nervous, absurd figure of theatre, concert-hall and gallery, only now did I discover the identity of him upon whom I had so often pondered at Aldershot. And his past phantomhood strengthened my feeling of friendliness for him. Moreover, this hitherto soundless spectre proved to be possessed of its own voice and accents, sharp and clear, with very much its own interpretation of the world it haunted: though the voice was, indeed, more practised and incisive on paper than in conversation. For at the time we first met him in Oxford, Ronald Firbank had, during two whole years, spoken to no one there except his charwoman and a guard on the train to London (upon this line he was, as we shall notice later, a well-known figure). He felt himself totally out of place in a war-mad, khaki-clad world, where there was no music, no gaiety, and in which one could no longer travel except on the business of death. He failed to summon up any enthusiasm whatever over the "Great" War, protesting that for his part he had always found the Germans "most polite." In fact, "that awful persecution" was one of the phrases which it was his wont to use in describing it in after years. It drove him to become more than ever a recluse, and deprived of all outside interest, *ennui* forced him to

write the book about which he had talked for so many years. These volumes were, therefore, far more truly than any others in the English language, the product of the war. He was in the best, the least boring, sense a war writer.

Very seldom, then, would he go out, except occasionally, and rather unexpectedly, for a bicycle ride. Or again, he might journey to London to see his publisher or solicitor. Firbank occupied charming rooms opposite Magdalen Tower, and we were now to see there for the first time that small collection of *objets d'art* from which he was never parted. With these few, chosen belongings, indeed, he standardised each place wherein he dwelt, whether it was a tent in the desert, a palace in Portugal, a furnished flat in London, an old house in Constantinople or these rooms at Oxford. Everywhere they provided for him a sufficiently personal setting. Just as his mind made of every subject of which it treated something new and interesting, so these things spread over his room an indefinable and delightful atmosphere that made of the most trite surroundings something unexpected.

Chief amongst these objects, which we were afterwards to see so often, and in so many different places, were two drawings by Downman, a bronze bull (would it be Greek or Renaissance?), a Felicien Rops drawing, a pencil portrait of Firbank by Albert Rutherston, a little green-bronze Egyptian figure of some bearded god or pharaoh, standing rigidly above a miniature marble pedestal, all the latest novels, a number of the silliest illustrated weekly





RONALD FIRBANK  
from a painting in oils by ALVARO GUEVARA





papers (which provided him with a constant source of amusement), several of his own published books and manuscripts bound in white vellum, a photograph of his mother in Court dress, mounted in a large silver frame, elaborate inkpots, coloured quill-pens, a vast tortoiseshell crucifix, and cubes of those large, blue, rectangular postcards upon which it was his habit to write. To this collection he subsequently added a fine drawing by Augustus John. There was always, too, a palm-tree near him, and in some way the author's personality was able to translate it back into a tropical and interesting plant, so that here it lacked that withered 1880 boarding-house air which it usually assumes in England. Moreover, on this occasion for our reception there was a veritable beacon of a fire and a profusion of orchids and peaches, gay cornucopia that banished the dim February light creeping in through the grey windows. It was, then, in this Oxford version of his habitual setting, which staged him so appropriately, that we first heard those delightful fits of deep, hoarse, helpless and ceaseless laughter, in such contrast to the perpetual struggle of his speech. For so nervous was he, that the effort required to produce his words shook his whole frame, and his voice, when at last it issued forth, was slow, muffled and low, but never perfectly in control. He suffered, I believe, from a nervous affection of the throat, which prevented him swallowing food easily. To this misfortune was due the fact that he drank so much more than the little he ate. On one occasion, for example, he went to dine with a

friend of ours, who in his honour had ordered a magnificent dinner, and refused to eat anything except one green pea !

As for his laughter, to which we have just referred, it would often descend on him just as he was beginning work. Usually he wrote his novels upon those huge blue postcards, which we have noticed piled up on his desk, writing on each wide oblong side of them, though each blank face only gave room enough for a few – perhaps ten – words, so much space did his large regular handwriting take up. Thus at the moment when he would be starting to inscribe laboriously one more word on the card in front of him, the essential absurdity of the situation that he was with such care elaborating would overcome him, and he must quit work till the next day.

It was during this first acquaintance with him at Oxford that he read us portions of *Valmouth*, the book upon which he was at the time engaged. “You have no idea how difficult it is,” I remember him saying, “to keep up one’s interest, when writing of a heroine who is over one hundred and twenty years of age – not that the other characters are meant to be any younger.” Perhaps he found in the end that youth, too, was merely relative, and that by presenting her companions as yet older, he could succeed in imparting a debutante quality to his heroine, for one of her friends is made to say, “The last time I went to the play was with Charles the Second and Louise de Querouaille to see Betterton play *Shylock*.”

It was at Oxford, also, that we arranged for the publication of one chapter of *Valmouth*, under the title of "Fantasia in A Sharp Minor," in *Art and Letters*. Of that now dormant periodical I was then an editor. The publication of this chapter, I think, helped to bring Firbank's work to the notice of a discriminating audience, though in the interests of truth it must be admitted that many of the people who now constitute his greatest admirers were at the time enraged by it beyond measure.

During the summers that were to follow in London, and during certain winters and springs (as, for example, that April and May when he had rented Bochlin's Villa in Florence, and when we would so often meet him in the Via Tornabuoni, staggering under the load of flowers he had bought, and looking round in a wild and helpless way for a cab to carry him home), we saw much of Firbank. Looking back over those years, let us face the truth; for the strange being of whom we write is interesting enough as writer and man to deserve such treatment. Let us admit, then, that there was about him something a little ridiculous, which blinded fools to his other remarkable and much more characteristic qualities, and which since his death, as during his lifetime, has made him the easy butt of vulgar journalists. As a talker he was most unequal; and if we are bound to say how extremely amusing he was for the first ten minutes of any meeting with him (always a deliriously funny period), we are also bound to add that, after a time, conversation became difficult – not but that every now and then he

would not convulse one with laughter. Nevertheless, one was always surprised in talking with him, so vague and almost incoherent did he seem, at his love and knowledge of beautiful things. He was not, I think, a deeply read man, but his reading was very different from the rather blowsy pastures so well cropped by the ordinary "literary man." French novels, French poetry and eighteenth-century Memoirs of every European country composed the bulk of it, and in these matters he was excessively well-informed; yet often in his books there flashes out an allusion to some subject or another on which one would not have expected him to be an authority, but which this reference proved him to have mastered.

In addition, there is surely to be traced in all his books a marked love and understanding of the stage and its personalities. Just as virtuosity and manner were for him the chief merits of literature, so he demanded in his favourites of the footlights mastery, manner and, above all, established fame; for the effect of celebrity, through a decade or so, upon the temperamental nature essential to the executant artist delighted him; and thus among those he most adored in the theatre were to be numbered Pavlova, Isadora Duncan, and Mrs. Patrick Campbell.

If it was his reading, as much as his own experience, which made the general sense of his books so cosmopolitan, yet it must be remembered that he had not only travelled, but had lived in various cities of Southern Europe and Northern Africa for

quite considerable periods. He had spent nearly a year, for example, in Madrid, and asseverated that there he had become a mighty horseman. Moreover he always accused a then promising young diplomat (and a now promising young author) of having stolen his charger; an unlikely, indeed mythical, theft, but one which caused him to harbour the greatest resentment. It accounts for the rather unflattering portraits of young diplomats in *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, just as it accounts, also, for the rather unflattering portraits of eccentric writers in a certain book by a young diplomat. Otherwise Firbank pursued no feuds and treasured hardly a single hatred, though he was apt, as he said, "to be disappointed" in his friends.

Occasionally, though, he would be angry, as, for instance, when he suddenly announced to everyone that I had said that the Firbank fortune had been founded on boot-buttons – a remark of which I had never been guilty. He was enraged about it, and would sit in the Café Royal for hours, practising what he was going to say in court, in the course of the libel action which he intended to bring against me. The great moment in it, he had determined, was to be when he lifted up his hands, which were beautifully shaped, and of which he was very proud, and would say to the Judge, "Look at my hands, my lord! How could my father have made boot-buttons? No never! He made the most wonderful railways." But within three weeks we were the best of friends again.

The first impression of him in conversation must



always have been surprise that so frail, vague, and extraordinary a creature could ever have arranged – let alone have created – a book. But there it was. He was a born as opposed to a self-made writer. This is, perhaps, the greatest gift that can descend upon authors, so many of whom will write because they are intelligent or clever and want to – not because they must – write. It was obvious as well, even at first sight, that Firbank's health was far from strong. But this delicacy at least was possessed of one advantage. It prevented him from being forced to waste his time in the Army. The constant callings-up and medical examinations had, though, further shattered his health, just as he, in his turn, must have somewhat shattered the health of the various military authorities with whom he came in contact. He told us, for example, that when, after a dozen or so examinations, the War Office finally rejected him as totally unfit for service (which anyone else could have told at a glance), and then, in their usual muddled way, at once called him up again, he replied to them through his lawyer with the threat of a libel action. The War Office, at a time when it governed the world, was so taken aback at this simple piece of individual initiative that it at once sent back to him a humble apology.

Wonderful as it was that a man, with apparently so tenuous a hold on life and its business, should be able to write novels, it was even more astonishing that so vague, delicate, and careless a person – one, in addition, who ate almost nothing and usually



drank a good deal – should survive travelling by himself in wild and distant countries. One would have taken him, the moment one saw him, as plainly destined to be defrauded or, if necessary, murdered, so weak and helpless did he appear ; an obvious victim for guile and violence, if ever there was one. But his resistance towards the world was of an order more subtle than that of the average person, and it may be that swindler and murderer desisted because they felt the latent strength of his personality. Moreover, not only did his apparent helplessness fail to injure, it actually tended to protect him, both from danger and from boredom, for he was always able, by dint of it, to compel others to carry out for him the tedious things of life. Far from feeling it a moral duty, as we had been taught, to do something unpleasant every day, he conceived that it was his moral duty to find others who would on every occasion perform it by proxy. Thus, for example, there was his visit to Mr. Augustus John. It was related that, torn between his desire for a drawing by that artist and his nervousness at having to meet him and express it, he drove round to John's studio in a taxi-cab, and decided, on the way, that the taxi-driver should introduce him to the great man and explain his business. The poor driver, therefore, was forced to act in the rôle of St. John the Baptist, to take the strain of the ultimate emergence of Ronald upon himself. After a time our novelist appeared, much quieted, from the cab, and everything was arranged.

Here I should like to acknowledge my debt to

Mr. Augustus John for his great kindness. Remembering this story, and knowing of Firbank's tremendous admiration for him, I wrote to him, and received in reply a most interesting letter, some of which I quote below, while other anecdotes contained in it I have, for sake of context, incorporated elsewhere in this essay.

"Ronald Firbank," he wrote, "came to me to have his portrait drawn some while before the publication of *Vainglory*. As you have heard, he sent his taxi-man in to prepare the way, himself sitting in the taxi with averted face, the very picture of exquisite confusion.

"He came frequently afterwards, although always with the utmost diffidence, and I made various studies of him. When the strain of confronting me became unbearable, he would seek refuge in the lavatory, there to wash his hands. This manœuvre occurred several times at each sitting.

"His mother once called and lamented the solitary life he led – a dear old lady, to whom Ronald was, I think, quite attached. Upon her death he for a moment, in my presence, hesitated on the brink of some almost Dickensian sentiment, but corrected himself just in time. . . . It's amazing how sometimes he struck, amidst his excellent persiflage, a chord of deep and heart-rending sentiment."

All those who knew Firbank best, agree that under cover of this seeming futility in matters of the world he was a shrewd and capable man of affairs. "He had," writes John, "in spite of appearances a practical side to his nature, carrying

always in his trunk, as he did, a few good big blocks of Welsh anthracite." And it is in accordance with this theory that he was certainly always coming to me to request that I would witness wills, deeds, sales of land and the like, so that there must have been a quite extensive business undercurrent to his life. One document I recall concerned his sale of a cemetery to a Welsh town, and seemed all that it could be of a morbid bargain.

But his ability as a traveller was not less marked, or more expected, than his talent for the affairs of life. Without doubt on meeting him for the first time one would have pronounced against his journeying alone, even for such a short distance as that from London to Oxford; but here, again, he had found someone to be responsible for him. It was his custom, during the two years he lived at Oxford, to travel back on the "Milk Train," but owing to the lateness of the hour, the difficult machinery of buying, and the unpleasantness of handling tickets, for himself, he had arranged a running account with the guard. This score he only settled once every two months. And then, on longer voyages, and ones on which his helplessness found no answer to its appeal, it at least led to the unexpected: and it was precisely in the unexpected that he most revelled. Moreover, his seeming incompetence furthered as much as it hindered his travelling. Thus as a very young man he went to France with some Cambridge friends. Their arrival in Rheims happened to coincide with the local "Wine Week," in which celebration they all joined

with the due earnestness of their years. Ronald remembered little that took place after dinner . . . and woke up to find himself in Venice ! It appeared that, once a fortnight, a train touched Rheims on its way to Venice, and that he had contrived to wander into the station and, with little money and no ticket, to catch this *rara avis* and remain undisturbed in it until his safe arrival at this distant but unintended destination the next day.

Rheims, however, is hardly dangerous except in a bacchic sense, but Ronald Firbank even managed to make a considerable stay in the negro republic of Hayti (which, however incorrect the impression may be, does, nevertheless, sound wild and far to ordinary English ears) without any untoward incident occurring. The announcement of his intention to go there was very typical. Usually he would write to one in his large, regular handwriting, on a whole series of those enormous blue postcards that we have mentioned, and upon which he wrote his novels. These postcards, for the purposes of correspondence, were written upon on both sides, placed in an envelope, and posted. This was his usual method, seldom a letter. But on this occasion he sent us a simple postcard, simply posted, on which was written : " To-morrow I go to Hayti. They say the President is a *Perfect Dear*."

All the same, there were occasions on which surprising events happened, events that were so like those that take place in his novels that they could only have happened to him. We have already suggested that there was something of the ecclesiastic

in his appearance. After the war he spent a good deal of time in Rome ; and we remember his being much alarmed because he declared that the priests had tried to kidnap him. He had descended the steps of his hotel one evening, and had asked the concierge to call him a cab. A smart, black-painted brougham drove up immediately and he stepped into it. The door was closed at once, and it drove off at a quick trot, before he had time even to tread on the toes of its occupants, for he found, to his bewilderment, that it was occupied by two priests, who quickly pulled him down between them, saying, " You are one of us, aren't you ! " Eventually, however, Ronald managed to escape.

After the war he had resumed his old method of life, the travelling and the returning to London for the season. But flying had recently come to his rescue, and now he often flew from London to Rome or to Constantinople. While, in another respect, his life had altered, for in these later days he would always solemnly announce his arrival in London through the social columns of *The Times* or *Morning Post*. By this time he had found many admirers of his writings among painters and authors, though among the more purely intellectual of these there was to be found, joined to their admiration, a sort of contempt, wholly undeserved. This was caused, I think, by the perfection of Firbank's novels, and by their lack of striving earnestness in a time when nearly every author was setting out to air his inward struggles to an unwilling but awed public. His assured income may also have been a



reason for envy, since it spared him the worries of forced journalism ; while he, for his part, conscious of the income which separated him from most of the world, felt that many people were only nice for the sake of the meals and drinks which they could expect from him. He would reply by treating them with an almost childish hauteur, as though he were a Tsar among authors, in itself an amusing feat from so amiable and delicate a man. But nobody who understood him could be offended, for this affectation of proud eccentricity was only equalled by the genuine kindness he displayed at other times.

During these years just after the war he was once again constantly to be seen. No theatrical or musical performance of note passed without his attending it. Now we usually found him lunching, dining or having supper at the Eiffel Tower, though formerly he had frequented one of the "Junior" political clubs, where his appearance and manner must have formed a strange contrast to that of the musty, bearded elders sitting all round him.

The genial and talented proprietor of the Eiffel Tower Restaurant, M. Stulik, was a great friend of Firbank, and used to take a deep interest in his welfare. He was, nevertheless, somewhat grieved at the smallness of this customer's appetite, and I remember once, when Firbank had just arrived from Rome by air, Stulik saying : " Mr. Firbank is much better. He is wonderful. What an appetite he has got now ! Yesterday for dinner he ate a whole slice of toast with his caviare . . . how I love my customers." Augustus John gives the ensuing



graphic account of a typical afternoon spent with Ronald, starting at this restaurant. "I once presented him to the Marchesa C—— at the Eiffel Tower; and we lunched together, all three. He then proposed that we should go to his rooms in Brook Street, but on the way deposited us at Claridge's and on some vague pretext disappeared himself. The Marchesa and I were becoming rather bored (it was 'between hours') when Ronald reappeared with an enormous bundle, which he unfolded in his rooms, displaying a magnificent bunch of highly exotic lilies which he offered with many apologies to the lady. He also showed her, but did not give her, a complete edition of his works, luxuriously bound. Naturally she was enchanted, and proposed we should all go to America together without wasting a moment. The plan was agreed to, but somehow or other never came to pass."

Often, too, Ronald was to be found at the old Café Royal, observing the odd life that centred there, the bookmakers in their bowler hats, the celebrities, the art-dealers, the painters, touts, financiers, and sculptors. Indeed, it inspired several passages in his novels, notably that one in *Caprice*, where the daughter of a Rural Dean enters the Café for the first time. And it was the situation of it, as much as its habitués, that entertained him, since he was always impressed by the moral of the tombstone-shop opposite; for just across the road there was a large plate-glass window, in which the white marble spectres of all the Christian emblems,

weeping females, and modest, plain headpieces gleamed all ghostly under the primrose light of arc-lamps. Dark inscriptions could be read on them, expressive of morbid hopes or fears, while, after any riot at the Café, when one or two people had been forcibly requested by the giant in charge of such procedure to leave the premises, they could be seen ricochetting across the road towards these graveyard paraphernalia, or standing swearing in return at his uniformed figure against this ominous and inevitable background. "It ought to be a warning to us all," Ronald would remark as he watched such scenes.

Yet whenever one saw him, whether it was here, at the opera, in a concert room or theatre, he seemed, always, to be alone. This is not to say that very often he was not the centre of an appreciative crowd of friends ; but even then he appeared lonely and by himself ; a figure who, however kind and amusing, was hedged off from his fellows by his temperament, and must live in a world of his own seeing, different from that of others. Even his longing for friendship, which was strong in him, could seldom surmount the barriers of his own intense nervousness. It seemed to him that he must ever seek the affection of others to a greater extent than they sought his friendship. There was a pathetic instance of this unhappy outlook one day at lunch time in the Café Royal. Firbank entered and walked up to one of his friends, a young artist who was sitting at a table having a drink, and asked him to give him luncheon. The young man replied that

he could not do so for he had no money; upon which Firbank took a pound-note out of his pocket, pressed it into the hand of his friend and, sinking at the same time into the seat opposite, exclaimed "How wonderful to be a guest!"

Yet his summer visits were really a delight to all his friends and acquaintances, for he never disappointed them. First there would be the solemn heralding of his arrival in *The Times* or *Morning Post*, and then some fresh piece of grotesque fantasy was sure to mark each occasion. One year he rented a small flat in Sloane Square, and there set out the few objects that were the assertion and extension of himself, raising aloft once more the standard of his palm-tree. Accordingly, he arranged with a flower shop in the Square to send in a gardener twice a day to water and attend to it properly. Ronald was much pleased with this man, for he wore a green baize apron, and had a rustic way of speaking, so that it was "just like being in the country." When, therefore, after a fortnight, he decided to move to an apartment in Piccadilly, he insisted, that no matter what the cost, the same gardener should come twice a day to water the palm-tree. Further, he laid down, as a condition of his employment, that the man must walk the whole way, except in wet weather, from Sloane Square to Piccadilly and back again, wearing his green baize apron and carrying a miniature watering-can, painted green to match it. The proprietor of the shop made no objection, for by this time he knew his customer, money rained in on him for orchids, and the gardener found him "Very

nice-spoken," while it was worth it, from Firbank's point of view, for it added a touch of rural pageantry to the grey streets of London. We can still recall the joy it used to give us, as we sailed down the ugly desert of Sloane Street on the top of a then open motor omnibus, to see this solemn rather self-conscious procession of one, and to realise that a familiar, fantastic sense of humour was once more at play among us.

Towards the end of his life he was as much pleased with the select appreciation of his books as disappointed at the small range of it. He had been simple enough, perhaps, to expect for his work as large and wide an audience as that obtained by Miss Ethel M. Dell or some such book as *Beau Tarzan*. He was especially gratified by the enthusiastic tone of Mr. Carl van Vechten, and would carry about his letters, together with various laudatory notices of his writings that had appeared recently in the American Press. He was also very elated at a letter sent to him by some transatlantic cinema magnate, asking for the film-rights of *Caprice* – the novel in which the heroine, who, as we have said, is the daughter of a Rural Dean, sets up in theatrical management, herself playing the chief part, and being too poor to rent a bedroom, has to sleep on the stage after an enthusiastic first-night, finally meeting her death by falling into a mouse-trap that she had not observed in the darkness!

At this period he undoubtedly looked very ill. He knew how delicate he was, and as he sat there at the Café Royal showing one these documents, or as

he lay, rather than sat, in the front row of the stalls at a theatre the sable angel of death ever hung over him. Moreover, he was much given to fortune-tellers, crystal-gazers, and givers of Egyptian amulets, and the soothsayers, seeing him, ever prophesied evil. It may be that it was his intense relish and understanding of the silly and absurd side of modern life that made him consult them. But he was in many ways, I think, so near the things which he so beautifully skimmed and parodied that perhaps he was genuinely superstitious. Be that as it may, however, at the end of each summer for five or six years it was his habit to drive round in state and say good-bye to my brother and myself; and, each time, he would tell us that he knew there were but a few months more for him to live. These doleful tidings had invariably been conveyed to him either by a Syrian magician or by some wretched drunkard at the Café Royal. Whilst talking with us of it, he would keep his taxi-cab waiting outside, ominously ticking out the pence and minutes, and would then leave us in order to drive on and bid farewell to his other friends. So many times did these final scenes occur that when in truth he came to us for the last good-bye in our house, it conveyed little, being merely part of a regular and ordinary routine. But actually my final meeting with him was in the Café Royal, then undergoing at the same moment the dual, and apparently contradictory, process of being pulled down and rebuilt. And upon that occasion, owing to a sudden impulse, I had the pleasure of telling him how exquisite a



writer I judged him to be, and how much, how infinitely, better than most of his contemporaries, many of whom were more highly esteemed. For Ronald suffered rather than gained from the fact that he was a true, born artist, with no propagandist axe to grind.

That winter he spent in Egypt, and then came back to Rome, where he had taken an apartment in the Palazzo Orsini for a term of years. But the change of climate from Cairo to Rome gave him a severe chill, which turned to pneumonia, and he died within a few days.

It was odd how slowly the news of his death travelled, and it was several weeks before most of his friends heard of it. It was barely recorded in the Press, and, at that, three weeks after it had taken place, while little or no mention was made of his books. The only friend of his who was in Rome at the time of his demise was Lord Berners. The latter saw him a day or two before the end, when he was already ill, and tells me that Firbank had no suspicion that he was dying. The doctor, too, appears at first to have treated the matter lightly, as an ordinary chill. So little did the dying man himself expect the end that only a few hours before it, feeling very much better, he discharged his nurse.

So he died : at the age of thirty-nine. He never saw forty, the thought of which he so much disliked. Growing older pained him, and would have pained him more, though he held, with one of the characters he created, that "I suppose when there's no more



room for another crow's-foot, one attains a sort of peace."

In any case, his death could not have been long averted, even if he had not contracted that fatal chill. Apparently he had been examined by a doctor before leaving England, and though he did not inform his patient of it, lungs and heart were even then in such a bad state that it was obvious that any illness would finish fatally for him.

Even about his last resting-place there was an inconsequential, as well as a tragic, element. For, through a strange error, the Catholic Firbank rests – not far from, of all people, Keats and Shelley – in the Protestant Cemetery at Rome. One could always, even in his lifetime, see a miniature legend in attendance upon him, hovering round him, waiting like a bird of prey to batten on his dead body : and already, even now, they say – and write – in America that Firbank never in fact died ; that he is alive, wandering round and observing in remote countries. And we, who knew him, are left to wish that this myth were the reality, and that again we might see that jaunty, sad, and unique figure, or hear once more those sudden gusts of deep silly laughter which so convulsed and shook his frame, or those few unexpected remarks, wrenched out of himself with so much seeming effort ; that we might again receive a sheaf of ridiculous postcards, with his large handwriting on them, and, above all, that we might have the joy of reading a new book from his pen, a book that would be so deliciously unlike any others in the world save his own. And many

years after his death, whenever any particularly ludicrous situation arises, we are still forced to cry "How I wish Ronald were here!" or "How like Firbank!" Indeed, he ranks high as a prophet and diviner of the future, for every-day life resembles more and yet more the subtle intricacies and simplicities of his novels.

## RONALD FIRBANK

BY LORD BERNERS

MY first meeting with Ronald Firbank was not exactly a felicitous one. It took place soon after the war at a performance of the Russian Ballet.

Firbank was not at his best in a theatre. The atmosphere of the Russian Ballet in particular seemed to go to his head, and his behaviour during the *entractes* and even during the performance itself was distinctly fantastic. One would become aware of a growing uneasiness in a certain portion of the audience, and after a time one discovered the cause of it to be the extraordinary antics of Ronald Firbank. One of his favourite postures seemed to entail sitting with his head nearly touching the floor and with his feet in the air.

It was at the Russian Ballet that an absurd incident occurred in which Firbank and Lady X (a well-known female eccentric) both loudly complained that the one had "leered" at the other.

On encountering Firbank for the first time, I was a little disconcerted both by his appearance and his general demeanour, which seemed to be attracting a good deal of attention. His incoherence (which I attributed to intoxication) I found decidedly embarrassing: and in those days I was still young enough to resent being embarrassed.

A few days later I met him again in Piccadilly – inappropriately enough, outside the Naval and Military Club. I feared another difficult encounter, and so, shouting at him “You are my favourite author!” I hurried on.

To become a friend of Firbank was no easy matter. One had to take a good deal of trouble. There was one’s own shyness to be overcome as well as his. A lady who was one of Firbank’s earliest friends and admirers told me that often when she used to visit him while he was living in Oxford (at his own invitation – there was no question of intrusion) she would find him in such a state of nervous diffidence that he would only talk to her with his back turned and looking out of the window.

A symbolical attitude perhaps! Many passages in his books seem as though written with his back turned and looking out of the window. And through that window there is no doubt that he saw some very curious things.

It was several years later, in Rome, that I came to know Firbank well – that is to say, as well as it was possible to know that strange, orchidaceous, incoherent, fantastic personality. Conversation with him was like playing tennis with an erratic tennis-player. You never knew in what direction his thoughts would fly. After a time a sort of technique could be acquired. It was no use, for instance, ever asking him a question, or, at all events, to expect a reasonable answer. He seemed to dread being pinned down to any positive assertion even of the most simple nature. “Where does So-and-so

live?" one might ask. "Why should one live anywhere?" he would reply, and go off into peals of convulsive laughter generally ending in a paroxysm of coughing. The phrase "I wonder!" was constantly on his lips, and uttered in a tone that seemed to evoke all the unsolved riddles of the universe.

The flashes of brilliance that animated his conversation and made his company so delightful are impossible to reconstruct. One might as well attempt to record the hovering of a humming-bird or portray the opalescence of a soap-bubble. There was an intriguing irrelevance, a delightful, fantastic silliness in all he said or did. (I have perhaps rather overdone the word "fantastic," but, then, Ronald Firbank was an Arch-Fantastic.)

Considering his aloofness, his detachment, his apparent antipathy for all the practical aspects of life, it is surprising that he ever managed to get anywhere. Yet he travelled into all the quarters of the globe with the greatest ease. On one occasion, even, in the course of an expedition down the Nile on a dahabeah, he succeeded, single-handed, in quelling a mutiny.

When in Rome he would rent some huge and generally rather gloomy apartment, where he would live in absolute solitude. It was stipulated that he should never see the servants. They were to live out and only come in to execute their functions, such as tidying up and preparing his meals, at certain specified times when he was absent.

A man I knew who occupied rooms on the

opposite side of the courtyard of a Palazzo where Firbank was living told me that sometimes in the depths of the night he would hear through the open windows the sound of chuckling and laughter coming from the lonely inmate of the apartment vis-à-vis. Like the Pope in *Cardinal Pirelli*, he "often laughed when he was alone."

He died in as strange and as aloof a fashion as that in which he had lived.

A few days before his death I motored out with him to Lake Nemi. Almost my last impression of him was seeing him ambling down the precipitous streets of Genzano followed by a crowd of children shouting "Ridolini! Ridolini!" (Ridolini – not to be confused with Mussolini – is the name of a popular Italian comic film character.) From time to time Firbank would stop and scatter handfuls of nickel coins, a proceeding which only tended to aggravate the situation.

He did not seem to me on that last excursion to be in any worse health than usual. He coughed a good deal, but not more alarmingly than on other occasions.

For four or five days after that I heard nothing from him. Thinking that he was engaged in writing, I did not wish to disturb him.

One evening I got a telephone message from the Hotel Quirinale saying that Mr. Firbank was very ill and had asked me to come and see him. The doctor was in the hotel, and I spoke to him on the telephone. He reassured me, and said that his patient was feeling much better that evening and



had even sent away the nurse who had been engaged for him. As it was then very late, I said that I would go round and see him the first thing in the morning.

But that night Ronald Firbank died.

Owing to his solitary way of living and his habitual reticence, it was extremely difficult to find out anything about him. I was his only friend in Rome at the time, and as to his domestic affairs I was as ignorant as anyone else. I knew he had a sister living, but her address was unknown. By the merest chance the name of his solicitor was discovered on a crumpled piece of paper.

I had never for a moment imagined that Firbank was a Roman Catholic. His attitude towards the Church of Rome both in his conversation and his writings was distinctly heretical. I believe that in his early youth he had thought of taking Holy Orders. But more than once he had said to me, "The Church of Rome wouldn't have me and so I laugh at her."

Thus he came to be buried in the Protestant Cemetery in Rome. It transpired later that he was a Roman Catholic. But, distasteful as this error may appear to Catholics, I cannot help thinking that he himself would prefer to lie in the shade of the Pyramid of Cestius, in the company of Keats and Shelley, than with a crowd of Italian bourgeois out at San Lorenzo.

The funeral took place on an early summer morning under a cloudless Italian sky, amid the cypresses and roses and the singing of the nightingales, whose vocal outpourings in Italy are not

confined, as in Northern countries, to moonlit groves. In fact, they sing more vigorously in the daytime than at night.

The nightingales that attended Ronald's funeral were presumably Papists, for they did their utmost to drown the voice of the officiating clergyman.

THE WORKS OF  
ARTHUR ANNESLEY RONALD FIRBANK

- ODETTE D'ANTREVERNES and A STUDY IN TEMPERAMENT. Elkin Mathews, 1905.
- VAINGLORY. With a frontispiece by Felicien Rops. Grant Richards, N.D. (1915).
- ODETTE. With four illustrations by Albert Buhrer. Grant Richards, 1916.
- INCLINATIONS. With two drawings by Albert Rutherton. Grant Richards, 1916.
- CAPRICE. With a frontispiece by Augustus John. Grant Richards, 1917.
- VALMOUTH. With a frontispiece by Augustus John. Grant Richards, 1919.
- THE PRINCESS ZOUBAROFF. With frontispiece and decorations by Michel Sevier. Grant Richards, 1920.
- SANTAL. Grant Richards, 1921.
- THE FLOWER BENEATH THE FOOT. With a decoration by C. R. W. Nevinson and portraits by Augustus John and Wyndham Lewis. Grant Richards, 1923.
- PRANCING NIGGER. With an introduction by Carl van Vechten. Frontispiece by R. E. Locher. New York, Brentano's, N.D. (1924.)
- \*SORROW IN SUNLIGHT. End papers designed by C. R. W. Nevinson. Brentano's, N.D. (1925).
- CONCERNING THE ECCENTRICITIES OF CARDINAL PIRELLI. With a portrait by Augustus John. Grant Richards, 1926.

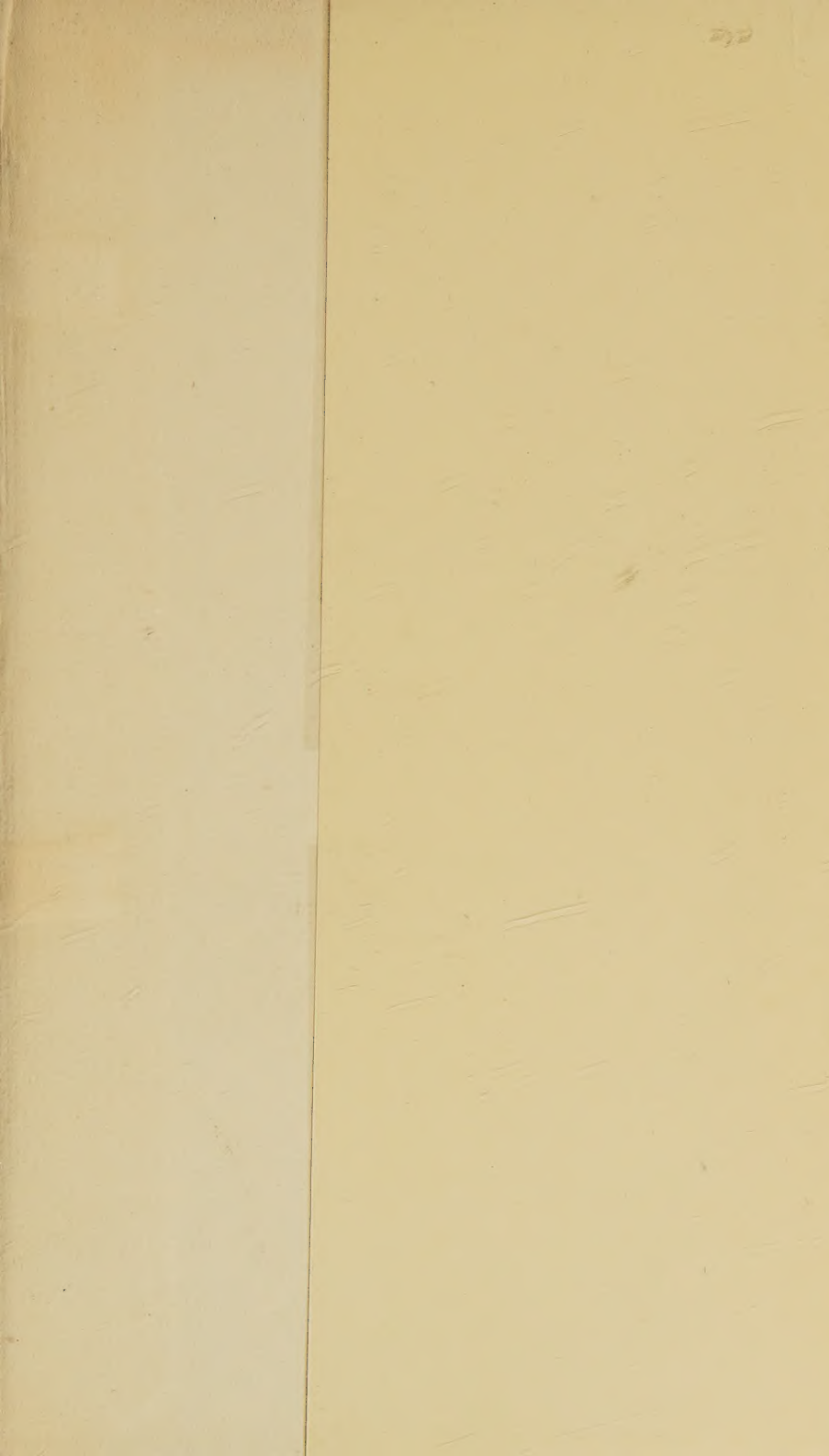
\*English title of *Prancing Nigger*











# The Works of RONALD FIRBANK

Rainbow Edition. 3s. 6d. net

- |                                                           |                               |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1 Prancing Nigger                                         | 5 Caprice                     |
| 2 Valmouth                                                | 6 Inclinations                |
| 3 The Flower Beneath<br>the Foot                          | 7 Vainglory                   |
| 4 Concerning the<br>Eccentricities of<br>Cardinal Pirelli | 8 The Princess Zou-<br>baroff |

## ODETTE : A Fairy Tale for Weary People

With 4 Illustrations.

Small 4to, paper.

1s. net

A few copies of this Edition, which was published in 1916, still remain.

"A series of the Firbank stories is now in the course of reissue in an agreeable slim format by Duckworths . . . I could not resist them . . . strange, odd, clear, queer, humorous, unlike anything else. . . The whole thing is lit with the refracting light that never was on sea or land. It is a lark, a joke, a satire. . . It is brief but it is homogeneous. It can be read easily and without shame or humiliation."—MR. ARNOLD BENNETT in *The Evening Standard*.

"A continuous sparkle of crisp dialogue. Firbank gives a real study, a vivid glimpse of a world strange but convincingly true."—*The Times*.

"In losing Ronald Firbank we lose the Mercutio of our time, a man of courage, of lightning wit, refreshing, fastidious, and original, refusing to take that seriously which seemed to him ridiculous."—MR. S. P. B. MAIS in the *Daily Telegraph*.

"Since the death of Mr. Ronald Firbank his reputation has been growing steadily. . . Elusive, daring, imaginative, and impelling, it should find many readers."—*T. P. and Cassell's Weekly*.

"His style is highly polished and at times attains an almost exquisite perfection. There is a superb undercurrent of satire running through everything he writes, and his portraits are admirable."—*Liverpool Post*.

GERALD DUCKWORTH & CO. LTD.

3 Henrietta Street, London, W.C.2